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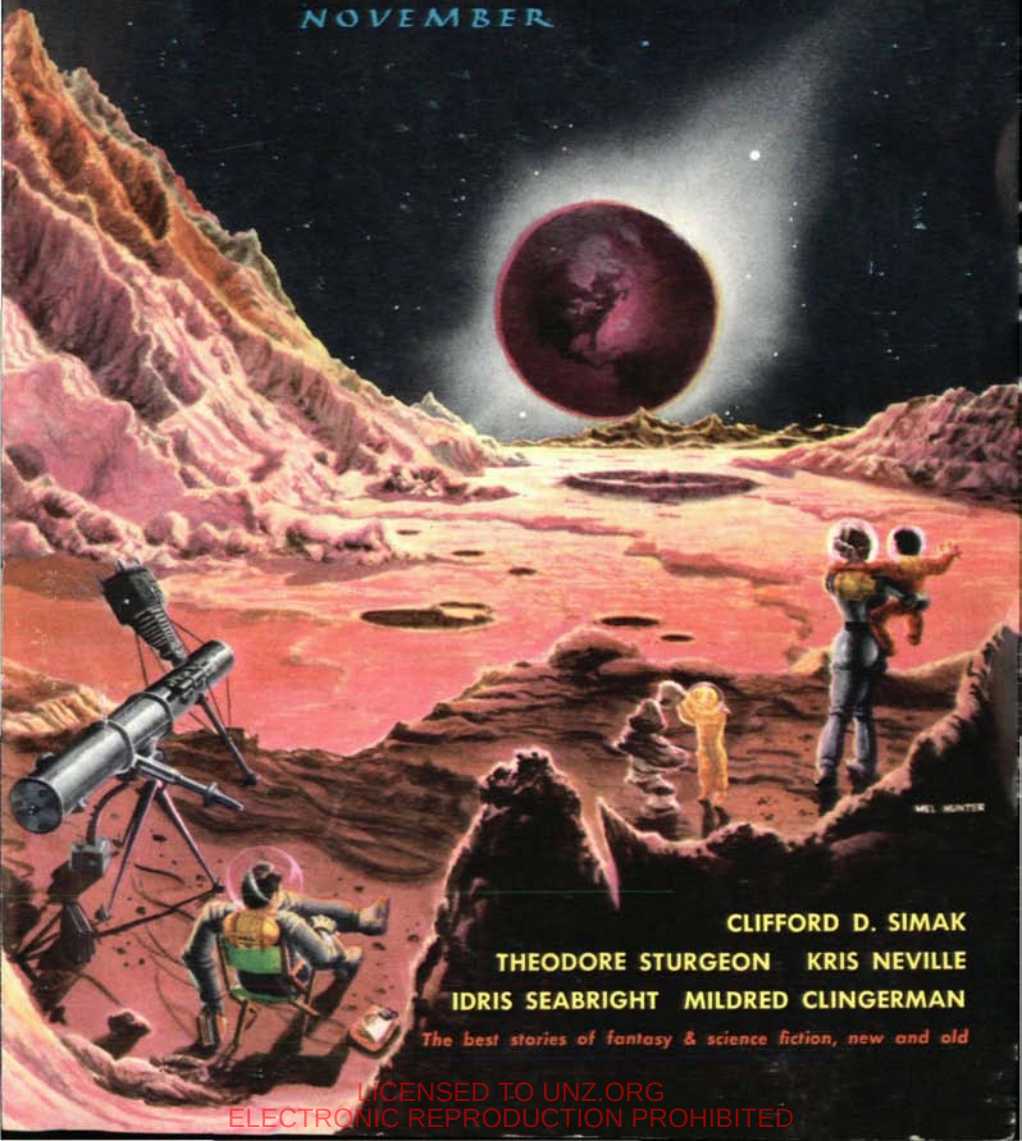

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 5, No. 5 NOVEMBER

Shadow Show (*novelet*)	*by* CLIFFORD D. SIMAK	3
Professor Schlucker's Fallacy	*by* ROBERT ABERNATHY	36
The Altruists	*by* IDRIS SEABRIGHT	43
Dr. Jacobus Meliflore's Last Patient	*by* MINDRET LORD	55
". . . Fight in the Hills"	*by* STEWART ROYCE	60
The Hound of Cullen (*short novelet*)	*by* W. B. READY	70
Blood in the Cellar	*by* VANCE RANDOLPH	89
Worship Night	*by* KRIS NEVILLE	90
Recommended Reading	*by* THE EDITORS	99
I've Got a Little List (*verse*)	*by* RANDALL GARRETT	101
My Lady Smiles	*by* CLEVE CARTMILL	102
The Silken-Swift	*by* THEODORE STURGEON	104
The Word	*by* MILDRED CLINGERMAN	121

Cover by Mel Hunter

(eclipse of the sun by the earth, as seen from the moon)

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 5, No. 5, NOV., 1953. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, $4.00 in U. S. and possessions; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. *Copyright, 1953, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved.**Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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Next month, *Fantasy and Science Fiction* will announce a new contest — wherein you can win a CASH prize — not only for yourself, but also for your favorite author of science-fantasy. And, incidentally, you'll be able to tell us about your pet hate.

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The contest will be open to all readers of *Fantasy and Science Fiction* with the exception of employes of Mercury Publications and their families.

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It is with real pleasure that we welcome to these pages Clifford D. Simak: pride of the Minneapolis Star, *creator of last year's classic novel,* CITY, *and one of the great "old pros" of science fiction. As was to be expected, Mr. Simak's premiere in F&SF is a memorable one. With characteristically unorthodox thinking, he examines a research team, working on a lonely asteroid, seeking to create life itself. But these are no two-dimensional intellects, living solely for their test tubes and equations, but fully rounded human beings, tormented by doubts of the wisdom of their project, haunted by a fear of blasphemous presumption. However, nothing in their work developed so oddly, or presented so curious a challenge, as did that unique form of play to which they turned for relaxation.*

Shadow Show

by CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Henry Griffith died just after breakfast, seated at his bench, with his notebook at his elbow and his pen still clutched within his fingers.

He died a natural death. The best medical examinations before hiring cannot detect the possibilities of a later embolism, nor can the best of medical care on the job. The embolus, unnoticed in the bloodstream, found its way finally to the heart, and Griffith died.

It was a natural death. But the job on which he died was not a natural job; and the consequences of his death were far from our concept of nature.

I

BAYARD LODGE, chief of Life Team No. 3, sat at his desk and stared across it angrily at Kent Forester, the team's psychologist.

"The Play must go on," said Forester. "I can't be responsible for what might happen if we dropped it even for a night or two. It's the one thing that holds us all together. It is the unifying glue that keeps us sane and preserves our sense of humor. And it gives us something to think about."

"I know," said Lodge, "but with Henry dead. . . ."

"They'll understand," Forester promised. "I'll talk to them. I know they'll understand."

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"They'll understand all right," Lodge agreed. "All of us recognize the necessity of the Play. But there is something else. One of those characters was Henry's."

Forester nodded. "I've been thinking of that, too."

"Do you know which one?"

Forester shook his head.

"I thought you might," said Lodge. "You've been beating out your brains to get them figured out, to pair up the characters with us."

Forester grinned sheepishly.

"I don't blame you," said Lodge. "I know why you're doing it."

"It would be a help," admitted Forester. "It would give me a key to every person here. Just consider — when a character went illogical. . . ."

"They're all illogical," said Lodge. "That's the beauty of them."

"But the illogic runs true to a certain zany pattern," Forester pointed out. "You can use that very zaniness and set up a norm."

"You've done that?"

"Not as a graph," said Forester, "but I have it well in mind. When the illogic deviates it's not too hard to spot it."

"It's been deviating?"

Forester nodded. "Sharply at times. The problem that we have — the way that they are thinking. . . ."

"Call it attitude," said Lodge.

For a moment the two of them were silent. Then Forester asked: "Do you mind if I ask why you insist on attitude?"

"Because it is an attitude," Lodge told him. "It's an attitude conditioned by the life we lead. An attitude traceable to too much thinking, too much searching of the soul. It's an emotional thing, almost a religious thing. There's little of the intellectual in it. We're shut up too tightly. Guarded too closely. The importance of our work is stressed too much. We aren't normal humans. We're off balance all the time. How in the world can we be normal humans when we lead no normal life?"

"It's a terrible responsibility," said Forester. "They face it each day of their lives."

"The responsibility is not theirs."

"Only if you agree that the individual counts for less than the race. Perhaps not even then, for there are definite racial implications in this project, implications that can become terribly personal. Imagine making. . . ."

"I know," said Lodge impatiently. "I've heard it from every one of them. Imagine making a human being not in the image of humanity."

"And yet it would be human," Forester said. "That is the point, Bayard.

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Not that we would be manufacturing life, but that it would be human life in the shape of monsters. You wake up screaming dreaming of those monsters. A monster itself would not be bad at all, if it were no more than a monster. After centuries of traveling to the stars, we are used to monsters."

Lodge cut him off. "Let's get back to the Play."

"We'll have to go ahead," insisted Forester.

"There'll be one character missing," Lodge warned him. "You know what that might do. It might throw the entire thing off balance, reduce it to confusion. That would be worse than no Play at all. Why can't we wait a few days and start over, new again? With a new Play, a new set of characters."

"We can't do that," said Forester, "because each of us has identified himself or herself with a certain character. That character has become a part, an individual part, of each of us. We're living split lives, Bayard. We're split personalities. We have to be to live. We have to be because not a single one of us could bear to be himself alone."

"You're trying to say that we must continue the Play as an insurance of our sanity."

"Something like that. Not so grim as you make it sound. Under ordinary circumstances, there'd be no question we could dispense with it. But this is no ordinary circumstance. Every one of us is nursing a guilt complex of horrendous magnitude. The Play is an emotional outlet, a letdown from the tension. It gives us something to talk about. It keeps us from sitting around at night washing out the stains of guilt. It supplies the ridiculous in our lives — it is our daily comic strip, our chuckle or our belly laugh."

Lodge got up and paced up and down the room.

"I said attitude," he declared, "and it is an attitude — a silly, crazy attitude. There is no reason for the guilt complex. But they coddle it as if it were a thing that kept them human, as if it might be the one last identity they retain with the outside world and the rest of mankind. They come to me and they talk about it — as if I could do something about it. As if I could throw up my hands and say, well, all right, then, let's quit. As if I didn't have a job to do.

"They say we're taking a divine power into our hands, that life came to be by some sort of godly intervention, that it's blasphemous and sacrilegious for mere man to try to duplicate that feat.

"And there's an answer to that one — a logical answer, but they can't see the logic, or won't listen to it. Can Man do anything divine? If life is divine, then Man cannot create it in his laboratories no matter what he does, cannot put it on a mass production basis. If Man can create life out of his chemicals, out of his knowledge, if he can make one living cell by the

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virtue of his technique and his knowledge, then that will prove divine intervention was unnecessary to the genesis of life. And if we have that proof — if we know that a divine instrumentality is unnecessary for the creation of life, doesn't that very proof and fact rob it of divinity?"

"They are seeking an escape," said Forester, trying to calm him. "Some of them may believe what they say, but there are others of them who are merely afraid of the responsibility — the moral responsibility. They start to thinking how it would be to live with something like that the rest of their life. You had the same situation a thousand years ago when men discovered and developed atomic fission. They did it and they shuddered. They couldn't sleep at night. They woke up screaming. They knew what they were doing — that they were unloosing terrible powers. And we know what we are doing. . . ."

Lodge went back to his desk and sat down.

"Let me think about it, Kent," he said. "You may be right. I don't know. There are so many things that I don't know."

"I'll be back," said Forester.

He closed the door quietly when he left.

II

The Play was a never-ending soap opera, the *Old Red Barn* extended to unheard reaches of the ridiculous. It had a touch of Oz and a dash of alienness and it went on and on and on.

When you put a group of people on an asteroid, when you throw a space patrol around them, when you lead them to their laboratories and point out the problem to be solved, when you keep them at that problem day after endless day, you must likewise do something to preserve their sanity.

To do this there may be books and music, films, games, dancing of an evening — all the old standby entertainment values the race has used for millennia to forget its troubles.

But there comes a time when these amusements fail to serve their purpose, when they are not enough.

Then you hunt for something new and novel — and basic — for something in which each of the isolated group may participate, something with which they can establish close personal identity and lose themselves, forgetting for a time who they are and what may be their purpose.

That's where the Play came in.

In olden days, many years before, in the cottages of Europe and the pioneer farmsteads of North America, a father would provide an evening's entertainment for his children by the means of shadow pictures. He would place a lamp or candle on a table opposite a blank wall, and sitting between

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the lamp and wall, he would use his hands to form the shadows of rabbit and of elephant, of horse and man and bear and many other things. For an hour or more the shadow show would parade across the wall, first one and then another — the rabbit nibbling clover, the elephant waving trunk and ears, the wolf howling on a hilltop. The children would sit quiet and spellbound, for these were wondrous things.

Later, with the advent of movies and of television, of the comic book and the cheap plastic dime store toy, the shadows were no longer wondrous and were shown no longer, but that is not the point.

Take the principle of the shadow pictures, add a thousand years of know-how and you have the Play.

Whether the long forgotten genius who first conceived the Play had ever known of the shadow pictures is something that's not known. But the principle was there, although the approach was different in that one used his mind and thought instead of just his hands.

And instead of rabbits and elephants appearing in one dimensional black and white, in the Play the characters were as varied as the human mind might make them (since the brain is more facile than the hand) and three-dimensional in full color.

The screen was a triumph in electronic engineering, with its memory banks, its rows of sonic tubes, its color selectors, ESP antennae and its other gadgets, but it was the minds of the audience that did the work, supplying the raw material for the Play upon the screen. It was the audience that conceived the characters, that led them through their actions, that supplied the lines they spoke. It was the combined will of the audience that supplied the backdrops and dreamed up the properties.

At first the Play had been a haphazard thing, with the characters only half developed, playing at cross purposes, without personalities and little more than cartoons paraded on the stage. At first the backdrops and the properties were the crazy products of many minds flying off at tangents. At times no less than three moons would be in the sky simultaneously, all in different phases. At times snow would be falling at one end of the stage and bright sunlight would pour down on palm trees at the other end.

But in time the Play developed. The characters grew full stature, without missing arms and legs, acquired a personality, rounded out into full-blown living beings. The background became the result of a combined effort to achieve effective setting rather than nine different people trying desperately to fill in the blank spots.

In time direction and purpose had been achieved, so that the action flowed smoothly, although there never came a time when any of the nine were sure of what would happen next.

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That was the fascination of it. New situations were continually being introduced by one character or another, with the result that the human creators of the other characters were faced with the need of new lines and action to meet the changing situations.

It became in a sense a contest of wills, with each participant seeking advantages for his character, or, on the other hand, forced to backtrack to escape disaster. It became, after a time, a never-ending chess game in which each player pitted himself or herself against the other eight.

And no one knew, of course, to whom any of the characters belonged. Out of this grew up a lively guessing game and many jokes and sallies and this was to the good, for that was what the Play was for — to lift the minds of the participants out of their daily work and worries.

Each evening after dinner the nine gathered in the theater and the screen sprang into life and the nine characters performed their parts and spoke their lines — the Defenseless Orphan, the Mustached Villain, the Proper Young Man, the Beautiful Bitch, the Alien Monster and all the others of them.

Nine of them — nine men and women, and nine characters.

But now there would be only eight, for Henry Griffith had died, slumped against his bench with the notebook at his elbow.

And the Play would have to go on with one missing character — the character that had been controlled and motivated by the man who now was dead.

Lodge wondered which character would be the missing one. Not the Defenseless Orphan, certainly, for that would not have been down Henry's alley. But it might be the Proper Young Man or the Out-At-Elbows Philosopher or the Rustic Slicker.

Wait a minute there, said Lodge. Not the Rustic Slicker. The Rustic Slicker's me.

He sat idly speculating on which belonged to whom. It would be exactly like Sue Lawrence to dream up the Beautiful Bitch — a character as little like her prim, practical self as one could well imagine. He remembered that he had taunted her once concerning his suspicion and that she had been very cold to him for several days thereafter.

Forester said the Play must go on and maybe he was right. They might adjust. God knows, they should be able to adjust to anything after participating in the Play each evening for months on end.

It was a zany thing, all right. Never getting anywhere. Not even episodic, for it never had a chance to become episodic. Let one trend develop and some joker was sure to throw in a stumbling block that upset the trend and sent the action angling off in some new direction.

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With that kind of goings-on, he thought, the disappearance of a single character shouldn't throw them off their stride.

He got up from his desk and walked to the great picture window.

He stood there looking out at the bleak loneliness of the asteroid.

The curved roofs of the research center fell away beneath him, shining in the starlight, to the blackness of the cragged surface. Above the jagged northern horizon lay a flush of light and in a little while it would be dawn, with the weak, watch-sized sun sailing upward to shed its feeble light upon this tiny speck of rock. He watched the flushed horizon, remembering Earth, where dawn was morning and sunset marked the beginning of the night. Here no such scheme was possible, for the days and nights were so erratic and so short that they could not be used to divide one's time. Here morning came at a certain hour, evening came at another hour, regardless of the sun, and one might sleep out at night with the sun high in the sky.

It would have been different, he thought, if we could have stayed on Earth, for there we would have had normal human contacts. We would not have thought so much, or brooded; we could have rubbed away the guilt on the hides of other people.

But normal human contacts would have meant the start of rumors, would have encouraged leaks, and in a thing of this sort there could be no leaks.

For if the people of the Earth knew what they were doing, or more correctly, what they tried to do, they would raise a hubbub that might result in calling off the project.

Even here, he thought — even here, there are those who have their doubts and fears.

A human being must walk upon two legs and have two arms and a pair of eyes, a brace of ears, one nose, one mouth, be not unduly hairy. He must walk; he must not hop or crawl or slither.

A perversion of the human form, they said; a scrapping of human dignity; a going-too-far, farther than Man in all his arrogance was ever meant to go.

There was a rap upon the door.

Lodge turned and called: "Come in."

It was Dr. Susan Lawrence.

She stood in the open doorway, a stolid, dumpy, dowdy woman with an angular face that had a set of stubbornness and of purpose in it. She did not see him for a moment and stood there, turning her head, trying to find him in the dusky room.

"Over here, Sue," he called.

She closed the door and crossed the room, stood by his side looking out the window.

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Finally she said, "There was nothing wrong with him, Bayard. Nothing organically wrong. I wonder. . . ."

She stood there, silent, and Lodge could feel the practical bleakness of her thoughts.

"It's bad enough," she said, "when they die and you know what killed them. It's not so bad to lose them if you've had a fighting chance to save them. But this is different. He just toppled over. He was dead before he hit the bench."

"You've examined him?"

She nodded. "I put him in the analyzers. I've got three reels of stuff. I'll check it all — later. But I'll swear there was nothing wrong."

She reached out a hand and put it on his arm, her pudgy fingers tightening.

"He didn't want to live," she said. "He was afraid to live. He thought he was close to finding something and he was afraid to find it."

"We have to find it, Sue."

"For what?" she asked. "So we can fashion humans to live on planets where humans in their present form wouldn't have a chance. So we can take a human mind and spirit and enclose it in a monster's body, hating itself. . . ."

"It wouldn't hate itself," Lodge told her. "You're thinking in anthropomorphic terms. A thing is never ugly to itself because it knows itself. Have we any proof that bipedal man is any happier than an insect or a toad?"

"But why?" she persisted. "We do not need those planets. We have more now than we can colonize. Enough Earth type planets to last for centuries. We'll be lucky if we even colonize them all, let alone develop them, in the next 500 years."

"We can't take the chance," he said. "We must take control while we have the chance. It was all right when we were safe and snug on Earth, but that is true no longer. We've gone out to the stars. Somewhere in the universe there are other intelligences. There has to be. Eventually we'll meet. We must be in a strong position."

"And to get in that strong position we plant colonies of human monsters. I know, Bayard — it's clever. We can design the bodies, the flesh and nerves and muscles, the organs of communication — all designed to exist upon a planet where a normal human could not live a minute. We are clever, all right, and very good technicians, but we can't breathe the life in them. There's more to life than just the colloidal combination of certain elements. There's something else and we'll never get it."

"We will try," said Lodge.

"You'll drive good technicians out of their sanity," she said. "You'll kill some of them — not with your hands, but with your insistence. You'll

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keep them cooped up for years and you'll give them a Play so they'll last the longer — but you won't find life, for life is not Man's secret."

"Want to bet?" he asked, laughing at her fury.

She swung around and faced him.

"There are times," she said, "when I regret my oath. A little cyanide. . . ."

He caught her by the arm and walked her to the desk.

"Let's have a drink," he said. "You can kill me later."

III

They dressed for dinner.

That was a rule.

They always dressed for dinner.

It was, like the Play, one of the many little habits that they cultivated to retain their sanity, to not forget that they were a cultured people as well as ruthless seekers after knowledge — a knowledge that any one of them would have happily forsworn.

They laid aside their scalpels and their other tools, they boxed their microscopes, they ranged the culture bottles neatly in place, they put the pans of saline solutions and their varying contents carefully away. They took their aprons off and went out and shut the door. And for a few hours they forgot, or tried to forget, who they were and what their labors were.

They dressed for dinner and assembled in the so-called drawing room for cocktails and then went in to dinner, pretending that they were no more than normal human beings — and no less.

The table was set with exquisite china and fragile glass and there were flowers and flaming tapers. They began with an entree and their meal was served in courses by accomplished robots and they ended with cheese and fruit and brandy and there were cigars for those who wanted them.

Lodge sat at the table's head and looked down the table at them and for a moment saw Sue Lawrence looking back at him and wondered if she were scowling or if the seeming scowl was no more than the play of candlelight upon her face.

They talked, as they always talked at dinner — the inconsequential social chatter of people without worry and with little purpose. For this was the moment of forgetting and escape. This was the hour to wash away the guilt and to ignore the stain.

But tonight, he noticed, they could not pull themselves away entirely from the happenings of the day — for there was talk of Henry Griffith and of his sudden dying and they spoke of him in soft tones and with strained and sober faces. Henry had been too intense and too strange a man for

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anyone to know him well, but they held him in high regard and although the robots had been careful to arrange the seating so his absence left no gap, there was a real and present sense that one of them was missing.

Chester Sifford said to Lodge: "We'll be sending Henry back?"

Lodge nodded. "We'll call in one of the patrol and it'll take him back to Earth. We'll have a short service for him here."

"But who. . . ."

"Craven more than likely. He was closer to Henry than any of the rest. I spoke to him about it. He agreed to say a word or two."

"Is there anyone on Earth? Henry never talked a lot."

"Some nephews and nieces. Maybe a brother or a sister. That would be all, I think."

Hugh Maitland said, "I understand we'll continue with the Play."

"That's right," Lodge told him. "Kent recommended it and I agreed. Kent knows what's best for us."

Sifford agreed. "That's his job. He's a good man at it."

"I think so, too," said Maitland. "Most psych-men stand outside the group. Posing as your conscience. But Kent doesn't work that way."

"He's a chaplain," Sifford said. "Just a God damn chaplain."

Helen Gray sat to the left and Lodge saw that she was not talking with anyone, but only staring at the bowl of roses which this night served as a centerpiece.

Tough on her, he thought. For she had been the one who had found Henry dead and, thinking that he was merely sleeping, had taken him by the shoulder and shaken him to wake him.

Down at the other end of the table, sitting next to Forester, Alice Page was talking far too much, much more than she had ever talked before, for she was a strangely reserved woman, with a quiet beauty that had a touch of darkness in it. Now she leaned toward Forester, talking tensely, as if she might be arguing in a low tone so the others would not hear her, with Forester listening, his face masked with patience against a feeling of alarm.

They are upset, thought Lodge — far more than I had suspected. Upset and edgy, ready to explode.

Henry's death had hit them harder than he knew.

Not a lovable man, Henry still had been one of them. One of them, he thought. Why not one of us? But that was the way it always was — unlike Forester, who did his best work by being one of them, he must stand to one side, must keep intact that slight, cold margin of reserve which was all that preserved against an incident of crisis the authority which was essential to his job.

Sifford said, "Henry was close to something."

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"So Sue told me."

"He was writing up his notes when he died," said Sifford. "It may be. . . ."

"We'll have a look at them," Lodge promised. "All of us together. In a day or two."

Maitland shook his head. "We'll never find it, Bayard. Not the way we're working. Not in the direction we are working. We have to take a new approach. . . ."

Sifford bristled. "What kind of approach?"

"I don't know," said Maitland. "If I knew. . . ."

"Gentlemen," said Lodge.

"Sorry," Sifford said. "I'm a little jumpy."

Lodge remembered Dr. Susan Lawrence, standing with him, looking out the window at the bleakness of the tumbling hunk of rock on which they lived, and saying: "He didn't want to live. He was afraid to live. . . ."

What had she been trying to tell him? That Henry Griffith had died of intellectual fear? That he had died because he was afraid to live?

Would it actually be possible for psychosomatic syndrome to kill a man?

IV

You could feel the tension in the room when they went to the theater, although they did their best to mask the tension. They chatted and pretended to be light-hearted and Maitland tried a joke which fell flat upon its face and died, squirming beneath the insincerity of the laughter that its telling had called forth.

Kent was wrong, Lodge told himself, feeling a wave of terror washing over him. This business was loaded with deadly psychological dynamite. It would not take much to trigger it and it would set off a chain reaction that could wash up the team.

And if the team were wrecked the work of years was gone — the long years of education, the necessary months to get them working together, the constant, never-ending battle to keep them happy and from one another's throats. Gone would be the team confidence which over many months had replaced individual confidence and doubt, gone would be the smooth cooperation and coordination which worked like meshing gears, gone would be a vast percentage of the actual work they'd done, for no other team, no matter how capable it might be, could take up where another team left off, even with the notes of the first team to guide them on their way.

The curving screen covered one end of the room, sunken into the wall, with the flare of the narrow stage in front of it.

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Back of that, thought Lodge, the tubes and generators, the sonics and computers — mechanical magic which turned human thought and will into the moving images that would parade across the screen. Puppets, he thought — puppets of the human mind, but with a strange and startling humanity about them that could not be achieved by carven hunks of wood.

And the difference, of course, was the difference between the mind and hand, for no knife, no matter how sharp, guided by no matter how talented and artistic a hand, could carve a dummy with half the precision or fidelity with which the mind could shape a human creature.

First, Man had created with hands alone, chipping the flint, carving out the bow and dish; then he achieved machines which were extensions of his hands and they turned out artifacts which the hands alone were incapable of doing; and now, Man created not with his hands, nor with extensions of his hands, but with his mind and extensions of his mind, although he still must use machinery to translate and project the labor of his brain.

Someday, he thought, it will be mind alone, without the aid of machines, without the help of hands.

The screen flickered and there was a tree upon it, then another tree, a bench, a duck pond, grass, a distant statue, and behind it all the dim, tree-broken outlines of city towers.

That was where they had left it the night before, with the cast of characters embarked upon a picnic in a city park — a picnic that was almost certain to remain a picnic for mere moments only before someone should turn it into something else.

Tonight, he hoped, they'd let it stay a picnic, let it run its course, take it easy for a change, not try any fancy stuff — for tonight, of all nights, there must be no sudden jolts, no terrifying turns. A mind forced to guide its character through the intricacies of a suddenly changed plot or some outlandish situation might crack beneath the effort.

As it was, there'd be one missing character and much would depend upon which one it was.

The scene stood empty, like a delicate painting of a park in springtime with each thing fixed in place.

Why were they waiting? What were they waiting for?

They had set the stage. What were they waiting for?

Someone thought of a breeze and you could hear the whisper of it, moving in the trees, ruffling the pond.

Lodge brought his character into mind and walked him on the stage, imagining his gangling walk, the grass stem stuck in his mouth, the curl of unbarbered hair above his collar.

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Someone had to start it off. Someone —

The Rustic Slicker turned and hustled back off stage.

He hustled back again, carrying a great hamper.

"Forgot m' basket," he said, with rural sheepishness.

Someone tittered in the darkened room.

Thank God for that titter!

It is going all right.

Come on, the rest of you!

The Out-At-Elbows Philosopher strode on stage.

He was a charming fellow, with no good intent at all — a cadger, a bum, a full-fledged fourflusher behind the façade of his flowered waistcoat, the senatorial bearing, the long, white, curling locks.

"My friend," he said. "My friend."

"Y' ain't m' friend," the Rustic Slicker told him, "till y' pay me back m' 300 bucks."

Come on, the rest of you!

The Beautiful Bitch showed up with the Proper Young Man, who any moment now was about to get dreadfully disillusioned.

The Rustic Slicker had squatted on the grass and opened his hamper. He began to take out stuff — a ham, a turkey, a cheese, a vacuum jug, a bowl of jello, a tin of kippered herring.

The Beautiful Bitch made exaggerated eyes at him and wiggled her hips. The Rustic Slicker blushed, ducking his head.

Kent yelled from the audience: "Go ahead and ruin him!"

Everyone laughed.

It was going to be all right. It would be all right.

Get the audience and the players kidding back and forth and it was bound to be all right.

"Ah think that's a good idee, honey," said the Beautiful Bitch. "Ah do believe Ah will."

She advanced upon the Slicker.

The Slicker with his head still ducked, kept on taking things out of the hamper — more by far than could have been held in any ten such hampers.

He took out rings of bologna, stacks of wieners, mounds of marshmallows, a roast goose — and a diamond necklace.

The Beautiful Bitch pounced on the necklace, shrieking with delight.

The Out-At-Elbows Philosopher had jerked a leg off the turkey and was eating it, waving it between bites to emphasize the flowery oration he had launched upon.

"My friends," he orated between bites, "— my friends, in this vernal season it is right and proper, I said right and proper, sir, that a group of

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friends should foregather to commune with nature in her gayest aspects, finding retreat such as this even in the heart of a heartless city. . . ."

He would go on like that for hours unless something intervened to stop him. The situation being as it was, something was almost bound to stop him.

Someone had put a sportive, if miniature, whale into the pond, and the whale, acting much more like a porpoise than a whale, was leaping about in graceful curves and scaring the hell out of the flock of ducks which resided on the pond.

The Alien Monster sneaked in and hid behind a tree. You could see with half an eye that he was bent upon no good.

"Watch out!" yelled someone in the audience, but the actors paid no attention to the warning. There were times when they could be incredibly stupid.

The Defenseless Orphan came onstage on the arm of the Mustached Villain (and there was no good intent in that situation, either) with the Extra-Terrestrial Ally trailing along behind them.

"Where is the Sweet Young Thing?" asked the Mustached Villain. "She's the only one who's missing."

"She'll be along," said the Rustic Slicker. "I saw her at the corner saloon building up a load. . . ."

The Philosopher stopped his oration in midsentence, halted the turkey drumstick in midair. His silver mane did its best to bristle and he whirled upon the Rustic Slicker.

"You are a cad, sir," he said. "To say a thing like that, a most contemptible cad!"

"I don't care," said the Slicker. "No matter what y' say, that's what she was doing."

"You lay off him," shrilled the Beautiful Bitch, fondling the diamond necklace. "He's mah frien' and you can't call him a cad."

"Now, B.B.," protested the Proper Young Man, "you keep out of this."

She spun on him. "You shut yoah mouth," she said. "You mealy hypocrite. Don't you tell me what to do. Too nice to call me by mah rightful name, but using just initials. You prissy-panted high-binder, don't you speak to me."

The Philosopher stepped ponderously forward, stooped down and swung his arm. The half-eaten drumstick took the Slicker squarely across the chops.

The Slicker rose slowly to his feet, one hand grasping the roast goose.

"So y' want to play," he said.

He hurled the goose at the Philosopher.

It struck squarely on the flowered waistcoat.

It was greasy and it splashed.

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Oh, Lord, thought Lodge.

Now the fat's in the fire for sure!

Why did the Philosopher act the way he did? Why couldn't they have left it a simple, friendly picnic, just this once? Why did the person whose character the Philosopher was make him swing that drumstick?

And why had he, Bayard Lodge, made the Slicker throw the goose?

He went cold all over at the question and when the answer came he felt a hand reach into his belly and start twisting at his guts.

For the answer was: He hadn't!

He hadn't made the Slicker throw the goose. He'd felt a flare of anger and a hard, cold hatred, but he had not willed his character to retaliatory action.

He kept watching the screen, seeing what was going on, but with only half his mind, while the other half quarreled with itself and sought an explanation.

It was the machine that was to blame — it was the machine that had had the Slicker throw the goose, for the machine would know, almost as well as a human knew, the reaction that would follow a blow upon the face. The machine had acted automatically, without waiting for the human thought. Sure, perhaps, of what the human thought would be.

It's logical, said the arguing part of his mind — its's logical that the machine would know, and logical once again that being sure of knowing, it would react automatically.

The Philosopher had stepped ceremoniously backward after he had struck the blow, standing at attention, presenting arms, after a manner of speaking, with the mangy drumstick.

The Beautiful Bitch clapped her hands and cried, "Now you-all got to fight a duel!"

"Precisely, miss," said the Philosopher, still stiffly at attention. "Why else do you think I struck him."

The goose grease dripped slowly off his ornate vest, but you never would have guessed for so much as an instant but he was faultlessly turned out.

"But it should have been a glove," protested the Proper Young Man.

"I didn't have a glove, sir," said the Philosopher, speaking a truth that was self-evident.

"It's frightfully improper," persisted the Proper Young Man.

The Mustached Villain flipped back his coattails and reaching into his back pockets, brought out two pistols.

"I always carry them," he said with a frightful leer, "for occasions such as this."

We have to break it up, thought Lodge. We have to stop it. We can't let it go on!

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He made the Rustic Slicker say, "Now look it here, now. I don't want to fool around with firearms. Someone might get hurt."

"You have to fight," said the leering Villain, holding both pistols in one hand and twirling his mustaches with the other.

"He has the choice of weapons," observed the Proper Young Man. "As the challenged party. . . ."

The Beautiful Bitch stopped clapping her hands.

"You keep out of this," she screamed. "You sissy — you just don't want to see them fight."

The Villain bowed. "The Slicker has the choice," he said.

The Extra-Terrestrial Ally piped up. "This is ridiculous," it said. "All you humans are ridiculous."

The Alien Monster stuck his head out from behind the tree.

"Leave 'em alone," he bellowed in his frightful brogue. "If they want to fight, let them go ahead and fight."

Then he curled himself into a wheel by the simple procedure of putting his tail into his mouth and started to roll. He rolled around the duck pond at a fearful pace, chanting all the while:

"Leave 'em fight. Leave 'em fight. Leave 'em fight."

Then popped behind his tree again.

The Defenseless Orphan complained, "I thought this was a picnic."

And so did all the rest of us, thought Lodge.

Although you could have bet, even before it started, that it wouldn't stay a picnic.

"Your choice, please," said the Villain to the Slicker, far too politely. "Pistols, knives, swords, battle axes. . . ."

Ridiculous, thought Lodge.

Make it ridiculous.

He made the Slicker say: "Pitchforks at three paces."

The Sweet Young Thing tripped lightly on the stage. She was humming a drinking song and you could see that she'd picked up quite a glow.

But she stopped at what she saw before her — the Philosopher dripping goose grease, the Villain clutching a pistol in each hand, the Beautiful Bitch jangling a diamond necklace, and she asked: "What is going on here?"

The Out-At-Elbows Philosopher relaxed his pose and rubbed his hands together with smirking satisfaction.

"Now," he said, oozing good fellowship and cheer, "isn't this a cozy situation. All nine of us are here. . . ."

In the audience Alice Page leaped to her feet, put her hands up to her face, pressed her palms tight against her temples, closed her eyes quite shut and screamed and screamed and screamed.

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V

There had been, not eight characters, but nine.

Henry Griffith's character had walked on with the rest of them.

"You're crazy, Bayard," Forester said. "When a man is dead, he's dead. Whether he still exists or not, I don't profess to know, but if he does exist it is not on the level of his previous existence; it is on another plane, in another state of being, in another dimension, call it what you will, religionist or spiritualist, the answer is the same."

Lodge nodded his agreement. "I was grasping at straws. Trying to dredge up every possibility. I know that Henry's dead. I know the dead stay dead. And yet, you'll have to admit, it is a natural thought. Why did Alice scream? Not because the nine characters were there. But because of why there might be nine of them. The ghost in us dies hard."

"It's not only Alice," Forester told him. "It's all the others, too. If we don't get this business under control, there'll be a flare-up. The emotional index was already stretched pretty thin when this happened — doubt over the purpose of the research, the inevitable wear and tear of nine people living together for months on end, a sort of cabin fever. It all built up. I've watched it building up and I've held my breath."

"Some joker out there subbed for Henry," Lodge said. "How does that sound to you? Someone handled his own character and Henry's, too."

"No one could handle more than one character," said Forester.

"Someone put a whale into that duck pond."

"Sure, but it didn't last long. The whale jumped a time or two and then was gone. Whoever put it there couldn't keep it there."

"We all cooperate on the setting and the props. Why couldn't someone pull quietly out of that cooperation and concentrate all his mind on two characters?"

Forester looked doubtful. "I suppose it could be done. But the second character probably would be out of whack. Did you notice any of them that seemed a little strange?"

"I don't know about strange," said Lodge, "but the Alien Monster hid —"

"Henry's character wasn't the Alien Monster."

"How can you be sure?"

"Henry wasn't the kind of mind to cook up an alien monster."

"All right, then. Which one is Henry's character?"

Forester slapped the arm of his chair impatiently. "I've told you, Bayard, that I don't know who any of them are. I've tried to match them up and it can't be done."

"It would help if we knew. Especially. . . ."

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"Especially Henry's character," said Forester.

He left the chair and paced up and down the office.

"Your theory of some joker putting on Henry's character is all wrong," he said. "How would he know which one. . . ."

Lodge raised his hand and smote the desk.

"The Sweet Young Thing!" he shouted.

"What's that?"

"The Sweet Young Thing. She was the last to walk on. Don't you remember? The Mustached Villain asked where she was and the Rustic Slicker said he saw her in a saloon and. . . ."

"Good Lord!" breathed Forester. "And the Out-At-Elbows Philosopher was at great pains to announce that all of them were there. Needling us! Jeering at us!"

"You think the Philosopher is the one, then? He's the joker. The one who produced the Sweet Young Thing — the ninth member of the cast. The ninth one to appear would have to be Henry's character, don't you see. You said yourself it couldn't be done because you wouldn't know which one it was. But you could know — you'd know when eight were on the stage that the missing one was Henry's character."

"Either there was a joker," Forester said, "or the cast itself is somehow sentient — has come halfway alive."

Lodge scowled. "I can't buy that one, Kent. They're images of our minds. We call them up, we put them through their paces, we dismiss them. They depend utterly on us. They couldn't have a separate identity. They're creatures of our mind and that is all."

"It wasn't exactly along that line that I was thinking," said Forester. "I was thinking of the machine itself. It takes the impressions from our minds and shapes them. It translates what we think into the images on the screen. It transforms our thoughts into seeming actualities. . . ."

"A memory. . . ."

"I think the machine may have a memory," Forester declared. "God knows it has enough sensitive equipment packed into it to have almost anything. The machine does more of it than we do, it contributes more than we do. After all, we're the same drab old mortals that we always were. We've just got clever, that is all. We've built extensions of ourselves. The machine is an extension of our imagery."

"I don't know," protested Lodge. "I simply do not know. This going around in circles. This incessant speculation."

But he did know, he told himself. He did know that the machine could act independently, for it had made the Slicker throw the goose. But that was different from handling a character from scratch, different from putting

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on a character that should not appear. It had simply been a matter of an induced, automatic action — and it didn't mean a thing.

Or did it?

"The machine could walk on Henry's character," Forester persisted. "It could have the Philosopher mock us."

"But why?" asked Lodge and even as he asked it, he knew why the machine might do just that and the thought of it made icy worms go crawling up his back.

"To show us," Forester said, "that it was sentient, too."

"But it wouldn't do that," Lodge argued. "If it were sentient it would keep quiet about it. That would be its sole defense. We could smash it. We probably would smash it if we thought it had come alive. We could dismantle it; we could put an end to it."

He sat in the silence that fell between them and felt the dread that had settled on this place — a strange dread compounded of an intellectual and a moral doubt, of a man who had fallen dead, of one character too many, of the guarded loneliness that hemmed in their lives.

"I can't think," he said. "Let's sleep on it."

"Okay," said Forester.

"A drink?"

Forester shook his head.

He's glad to drop it, too, thought Lodge. He's glad to get away.

Like a hurt animal, he thought. All of us, like hurt animals, crawling off to be alone, sick of one another, poisoned by the same faces eternally sitting across the table or meeting in the halls, of the same mouths saying the same inane phrases over and over again until when you meet the owner of a particular mouth, you know before he says it what he is going to say.

"Good night, Bayard."

"Night, Kent. Sleep tight."

"See you."

"Sure," said Lodge.

The door shut softly.

Good night. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite.

VI

He woke, screaming in the night.

He sat bolt upright in the middle of the bed and searched with numbed mind for the actuality, slowly, clumsily separating the actuality from the dream, coming aware again of the room he slept in, of the furniture, of his own place and who he was and what he did and why he happened to be there.

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It was all right, he told himself. It had been just a dream. The kind of dream that was common here. The kind of dream that everyone was having.

The dream of walking down a street or road, or walking up a stairs, of walking almost anywhere and of meeting something — a spider-like thing, or a worm-like thing, or a squatting monstrosity with horns and drooling mouth or perhaps something such as could be fabricated only in a dream and have it stop and say hello and chat — for it was human, too, just the same as you.

He sat and shivered at the memory of the one he'd met, of how it had put a hairy, taloned claw around his shoulder, of how it had drooled upon him with great affection and had asked him if he had the time to catch a drink because it had a thing or two it wanted to talk with him about. Its odor had been overpowering and its shape obscene and he'd tried to shrink from it, had tried to run from it, but could neither shrink nor run, for it was a man like him, clothed in different flesh.

He swung his legs off the bed and found his slippers with searching toes and scuffed his feet into them. He found his robe and stood up and put it on and went out to the office.

There he mixed himself a drink.

Sleep tight, he thought. God, how can a man sleep tight? Now it's got me as well as all the others.

The guilt of it — the guilt of what mankind meant to do.

Although, despite the guilt, there was a lot of logic in it.

There were planets upon which no human could have lived for longer than a second — because of atmospheric pressure, because of overpowering gravity, because of lack of atmosphere or poison atmosphere, or because of any one or any combination of a hundred other reasons.

And yet those planets had economic and strategic value — every one of them. Some of them had both great economic and great strategic value. And if Man were to hold the galactic empire which he was carving out against the possible appearance of some as-yet-unknown alien foe, he must man all economic and strategic points, must make full use of all the resources of his new empire.

For that somewhere in the galaxy there were other intelligences as yet unmet by men there could be little doubt. The sheer mathematics of pure chance said there had to be. Given an infinite space, the possibility of such an intelligence also neared infinity. Friend or foe — you couldn't know. But you couldn't take a chance. So you planned and built against the day of meeting.

And in such planning to bypass planets of economic and strategic value was sheer insanity.

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Human colonies must be planted on those planets — must be planted there and grow against the day of meeting so that their numbers and their resources and their positioning in space might be thrown into the struggle if the struggle came to be.

And if Man, in his natural form, could not exist there — why, then you changed his form. You manufactured bodies that could live there, that could fit into the planets' many weird conditions, that could live on those planets and grow and build and carry out Man's plans.

Man could build those bodies. He had the technique to compound the flesh and bone and nerve, he had the skill to duplicate the mechanisms that produced the hormones, he had ferreted out the secrets of the enzymes and the amino acids and had at his fingertips all the other know-how to construct a body — any body, not just a human body. Biological engineering had become an exact science and biological blueprints could be drawn up to meet any conceivable set of planetary conditions. Man was all set to go on his project for colonization by humans in strange nonhuman forms.

Ready except for one thing; he could make everything but life.

Now the search for life went on, a top priority, highly classified research program carried out here and on other asteroids, with the teams of biochemists, metabolists, endocrinologists and others isolated on the tumbling slabs of rock, guarded by military patrols operating out in space, hemmed in by a million regulations and uncounted security checks.

They sought for life, working down in that puzzling gray area where nonlife was separated from life by a shadow zone and a strange unpredictability that was enough to drive one mad, working with the viruses and crystals which at one moment might be dead and the next moment half alive and no man as yet who could tell why this was or how it came about.

That there was a definite key to life, hidden somewhere against Man's searching, was a belief that never wavered in the higher echelons, but on the guarded asteroids there grew up a strange and perhaps unscientific belief that life was not a matter of fact to be pinned down by formula or equation, but rather a matter of spirit, with some shading to the supernatural — that it was not something that Man was ever meant to know, that to seek it was presumptuous and perhaps sacrilegious, that it was a tangled trap into which Man had lured himself by his madcap hunt for knowledge.

And I, thought Bayard Lodge, I am one of those who drive them on in this blind and crazy search for a thing that we were never meant to find, that for our peace of mind and for our security of soul we never should have sought. I reason with them when they whisper out their fears, I kid them out of it when they protest the inhumanity of the course we plan, I keep them working and I kill each of them just a little every day, kill the humanity of

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them inch by casual inch — and I wake up screaming because a *human* thing I met put its arm around me and asked me to have a drink with it.

He finished off his drink and poured another one and this time did not bother with the mix.

"Come on," he said to the monster of the dream. "Come on, friend. I'll have that drink with you."

He gulped it down and did not notice the harshness of the uncut liquor.

"Come on," he shouted at the monster. "Come on and have that drink with me!"

He stared around the room, waiting for the monster.

"What the hell," he said, "we're all human, aren't we?"

He poured another one and held it in a fist that suddenly was shaky.

"Us humans," he said, still talking to the monster, "have got to stick together."

VII

All of them met in the lounge after breakfast and Lodge, looking from face to face, saw the terror that lay behind the masks they kept in front of them, could sense the unvoiced shrieking that lay inside of them, held imprisoned by the iron control of breeding and of discipline.

Kent Forester lit a careful cigarette and when he spoke his voice was conversationally casual, and Lodge, watching him as he talked, knew the price he paid to keep his voice casual.

"This is something," Forester said, "that we can't allow to keep on eating on us. We have to talk it out."

"You mean rationalize it?" asked Sifford.

Forester shook his head. "Talk it out, I said. This is once we can't kid ourselves."

"There were nine characters last night," said Craven.

"And a whale," said Forester.

"You mean one of. . . ."

"I don't know. If one of us did, let's speak up and say so. There's not a one among us who can't appreciate a joke."

"A grisly joke," said Craven.

"But a joke," said Forester.

"I would like to think it was a joke," Maitland declared. "I'd feel a lot easier if I knew it was a joke."

"That's the point," said Forester. "That's what I'm getting at."

He paused a moment.

"Anyone?" he asked.

No one said a word.

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They waited.

"No one, Kent," said Lodge.

"Perhaps the joker doesn't want to reveal himself," said Forester. "I think all of us could understand that. Maybe we could hand out slips of paper. . . ."

"Hand them out," Sifford grumbled.

Forester took sheets of folded paper from his pocket, carefully tore the strips. He handed out the strips.

"If anyone played a joke," Lodge pleaded, "for God's sake let us know."

The slips came back. Some of them said "no," others of them said "no joke," one said "I didn't do it."

Forester wadded up the strips.

"Well, that lets that idea out," he said. "I must admit I didn't have much hope."

Craven lumbered to his feet. "There's one thing that all of us have been thinking," he said, "and it might as well be spoken. It's not a pleasant subject."

He paused and looked around him at the others, as if defying them to stop him.

"No one liked Henry too well," he said. "Don't deny it. He was a hard man to like. A hard man any way you look at him. I was closer to him than any of you. I've agreed to say a few words for him at the service this afternoon. I am glad to do it, for he was a good man despite his hardness. He had a tenacity of will, a stubbornness such as you seldom find even in a hard man. And he had moral scruples that none of us could guess. He would talk to me a little — really talk — and that's something that he never did with the rest of you.

"Henry was close to something. He was scared. He died."

"There was nothing wrong with him."

He looked at Dr. Lawrence.

"Was there, Susan?" he asked. "Was there anything wrong with him?"

"Not a thing," said Dr. Susan Lawrence. "He should not have died."

Craven turned to Lodge.

"He talked with you recently."

"A day or two ago," said Lodge. "He seemed quite normal then."

"What did he talk about?"

"Oh, the usual things. Minor matters."

"Minor matters?" Mocking.

"All right, then. If you want it that way. He talked about not wanting to go on. He said our work was unholy. That's the word he used — unholy."

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Lodge looked around the room. "That's one the rest of you have never thought to use. Unholy."

"He was more insistent than usual?"

"Well, no," said Lodge. "It was the first time he had ever talked to me about it. The only person engaged in the research here, I believe, who had not talked with me about it at one time or another."

"And you talked him into going back."

"We discussed it."

"You killed the man."

"Perhaps," said Lodge. "Perhaps I'm killing all of you. Perhaps you're killing yourselves and I myself. How am I to know?"

He said to Dr. Lawrence: "Sue, could a man die of a psychosomatic illness brought about by fear?"

"Clinically, no," said Susan Lawrence. "Practically, I'm afraid, the answer might be yes."

"He was trapped," said Craven.

"Mankind's trapped," snapped Lodge. "If you must point your finger, point it at all of us. Point it at the whole community of Man. . . ."

"I don't think," Forester interrupted, "that this is pertinent."

"It is," insisted Craven, "and I will tell you why. I'd be the last to admit the existence of a ghost. . . ."

Alice Page came swiftly to her feet.

"Stop it!" she cried. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

"Miss Page, please," said Craven.

"But you're saying. . . ."

"I'm saying that if there ever was a situation where a departed spirit had a motive — and I might even say a right — to come back and haunt his place of death that this is it."

"Sit down, Craven," Lodge commanded, sharply.

Craven hesitated angrily, then sat down, grumbling to himself.

Lodge said, "If there's any point in continuing the discussion along these lines, I insist that it be done objectively."

Maitland said, "There's no point to it I can see. As scientists who are most intimately concerned with life we must recognize that death is an utter ending."

"That," objected Sifford, "is open to serious question and you know it."

Forester broke in, his voice cool. "Let's defer the matter for a moment. We can come back to it. There is another thing."

He hurried on. "Another thing that we should know. Which of the characters was Henry's character?"

No one said a word.

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"I don't mean," said Forester, "to try to find which belonged to whom. But by a process of elimination. . . ."

"All right," said Sifford. "Hand out the slips again."

Forester brought out the paper in his pocket, tore more strips.

Craven protested. "Not just slips," he said. "I won't fall for a trick like that."

Forester looked up from the slips.

"Trick?"

"Of course," said Craven, harshly. "Don't deny it. You've been trying to find out."

"I don't deny it," Forester told him. "I'd have been derelict in my duty if I hadn't tried."

Lodge said: "I wonder why we keep this secret thing so closely to ourselves. It might be all right under normal circumstances, but these aren't normal circumstances. I think it might be best if we made a clean breast of it. I, for one, am willing. I'll lead off if you only say the word."

He waited for the word.

There was no word.

They all stared back at him and there was nothing in their faces — no anger, no fear, nothing at all that a man could read.

Lodge shrugged the defeat from his shoulders.

He said to Craven: "All right, then. What were you saying?"

"I was saying that if we wrote down the names of our characters it would be no better than standing up and shouting them aloud. Forester knows our handwriting. He could spot every slip."

Forester protested. "I hadn't thought of it. I ask you to believe I hadn't. But what Craven says is true."

"All right, then?" asked Lodge.

"Ballots," Craven said. "Fix up ballots with the characters' names upon them."

"Aren't you afraid we might be able to identify your X's?"

Craven looked levelly at Lodge. "Since you mention it, I might be."

Forester said, wearily, "We have a batch of dies down in the labs. Used for stamping specimens. I think there's an X among them."

"That would satisfy you?" Lodge asked Craven.

Craven nodded that it would.

Lodge heaved himself out of the chair.

"I'll get the stamp," he said. "You can fix the ballots while I'm after it."

Children, he thought.

Just so many children.

Suspicion and selfish and frightened — like cornered animals.

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Cornered between the converging walls of fear and guilt, trapped in the corner of their own insecurity.

He walked down the stairs to the laboratories, his heels ringing on the metal treads, with the sound of his walking echoing from the hidden corners of the fear and guilt.

If Henry hadn't died right now, he thought, it might have been all right. We might have muddled through.

But he knew that probably was wrong. For if it had not been Henry's death, it would have been something else. They were ready for it — more than ready for it. It would not have taken much at any time in the last few weeks to have lit the fuse.

He found the die and ink pad and tramped back upstairs again.

The ballots lay upon the table and someone had found a shoe box and cut a slit out of its lid to make a ballot box.

"We'll all sit over on this side of the room," said Forester, "and we'll go up, one by one, and vote."

And if anyone saw the ridiculous side of speaking of what they were about to do as voting, they pointedly ignored it.

Lodge put the die and ink pad down on the table top and walked across the room to take his seat.

"Who wants to start it off?" asked Forester.

No one said a word.

Even afraid of this, thought Lodge.

Then Maitland said he would.

They sat in utter silence as each walked forward to mark a ballot, to fold it and to drop it in the box. Each of them waited for the one to return before another walked out to the table.

Then it finally was done and Forester went to the table, took up the box and shook it, turning it this way and that to change the order of the ballots, so that no one might guess by their position whom they might belong to.

"I'll need two monitors," he said.

His eyes looked them over. "Craven," he said. "Sue."

They stood up and went forward.

Forester opened the box.

He took out a ballot, unfolded it and read it, passed it on to Dr. Lawrence and she passed it on to Craven.

"The Defenseless Orphan."

"The Rustic Slicker."

"The Alien Monster."

"The Beautiful Bitch."

"The Sweet Young Thing."

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Wrong on that one, Lodge told himself. But who else could it be? She had been the last one on. She had been the ninth.

Forester went on, unfolding the ballots and reading them.

"The Extra-Terrestrial Ally."

"The Proper Young Man."

Only two left now. Only two. The Out-At-Elbows Philosopher and the Mustached Villain.

I'll make a guess, Lodge said to himself. I'll make a bet. I'll bet on which one was Henry.

He was the Mustached Villain.

Forester unfolded the last ballot and read aloud the name.

"The Mustached Villain."

So I lose the bet, thought Lodge.

He heard the rippling hiss of indrawn breath from those around him, the swift, stark terror of what the balloting had meant.

For Henry's character had been the most self-assertive and dominant in last night's Play: the Philosopher.

VIII

The script in Henry's notebook was close and crabbed, with a curtness to it, much like the man himself. His symbols and his equations were a triumph of clarity, but the written words had a curious backward, petulant slant and the phrases that he used were laconic to the point of rudeness — although whom he was being rude to, unless it were himself, was left a matter of conjecture.

Maitland closed the book with a snap and shoved it away from him, out into the center of the table.

"So that was it," he said.

They sat in quietness, their faces pale and drawn, as if in bitter fact they might have seen the ghost of Craven's hinting.

"That's the end of it," snapped Sifford. "I won't. . . ."

"You won't what?" asked Lodge.

Sifford did not answer, just sitting there with his hands before him on the table, opening and closing them, making great tight fists of them, then straightening out his fingers, stretching them as if he meant by sheer power of will to bend them back farther than they were meant to go.

"Henry was crazy," said Susan Lawrence curtly. "A man would have to be to dream up that sort of evidence."

"As a medical person," Maitland said, "we could expect that reaction from you."

"I work with life," said Susan Lawrence. "I respect it and it is my job to

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preserve it as long as it can be kept within the body. I have a great compassion for the things possessing it."

"Meaning we haven't?"

"Meaning you have to live with it and come to know it for its power and greatness, for the fine thing that it is, before you can appreciate or understand its wondrous qualities."

"But, Susan. . . ."

"And I know," she said, rushing on to head him off. "I know that it is more than decay and breakdown, more than the senility of matter. It is something greater than disease. To argue that life is the final step to which matter is reduced, the final degradation of the nobility of soil and ore and water is to argue that a static, unintelligent, purposeless existence is the norm of the universe."

"We're getting all tangled up semantically," suggested Forester. "As living things the terms we use have no comparative values with the terms that might be used for universal purpose, even if we knew those universal terms."

"Which we don't," said Helen Gray. "What you say would be true especially if what Henry had thought he had found was right."

"We'll check Henry's notes," Lodge told them grimly. "We'll follow him step by step. I think he's wrong, but on the chance he isn't, we can't pass up an angle. . . ."

Sifford bristled. "You mean even if he were right you would go ahead? That you would use even so humanly a degrading piece of evidence to achieve our purpose?"

"Of course I would," said Lodge. "If life is a disease and a senility, all right, then, it is disease and senility. As Kent and Helen pointed out, the terms are not comparative when used in a universal sense. What is poison for the universe is — well, is life for us. If Henry was right, his discovery is no more than the uncovering of a fact that has existed since time untold. . . ."

"You don't know what you're saying," Sifford said.

"But I do," Lodge told him bluntly. "You have grown neurotic. You and some of the others. Maybe I, myself. Maybe all of us. We are ruled by fear — you by the fear of your job, I by the fear that the job will not be done. We've been penned up, we've been beating out our brains against the stone walls of our conscience and a moral value suddenly furbished up and polished until it shines like the shield of Galahad. Back on the Earth you wouldn't give this thing a second thought. You'd gulp a little, maybe, then you'd swallow it, if it were proven true, and you'd go ahead to track down that principle of decay and of disease we happen to call life. The

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principle itself would be only one more factor for your consideration, one more tool to work with, another bit of knowledge.

"But here you claw at the wall and scream. . . ."

"Bayard!" shouted Forester. "Bayard, you can't. . . ."

"I can," Lodge told him, "and I am. I'm sick of all their whimpering and baying. I'm tired of spoonfed fanatics who drove themselves to their own fanaticism by their own synthetic fears. It takes men and women with knife-sharp minds to lick this thing we're after. It takes guts and intelligence. . . ."

Craven was white-lipped with fury. "We've worked," he shouted. "Even when everything within us, even when all our decency and intelligence and our religious instincts told us not to work, we worked. And don't say you kept us at it, you with your mealy words and your kidding and your back slapping. Don't say you laughed us into it. . . ."

Forester pounded the table with a fist.

"Let's quit this arguing," he cried. "Let's get down to cases."

Craven settled back in his chair, face still white with anger. Sifford kept on making fists.

"Henry wrote a conclusion," said Forester. "Well, hardly a conclusion. Let's call it a suspicion. Now what do you want to do about it? Ignore it, run from it, test it for its proof?"

"I say test it," Craven said. "It was Henry's work. Henry's gone and can't speak for his own beliefs. We owe at least that much to him."

"If it can be tested," Maitland qualified. "To me it sounds more like philosophy than science."

"Philosophy runs hand in hand with science," said Alice Page. "We can't simply brush it off because it sounds involved."

"I didn't say involved," Maitland objected. "What I meant was — oh, hell, let's go ahead and check it."

"Check it," Sifford said.

He swung around on Lodge. "And if it checks out, if it comes anywhere near to checking, if we can't utterly disprove it, I'm quitting. I'm serving notice now. . . ."

"That's your privelege, Sifford, any time you wish."

"It might be hard to prove anything one way or the other," said Helen Gray. "It might not be any easier to disprove than prove."

Lodge saw Sue Lawrence looking at him and there was grim laughter and something of grudging admiration and a touch of confused cynicism in her face, as if she might be saying to him:

Well, you've done it again. I didn't think you would — not this time, I didn't. But you did. Although you won't always do it. There'll come a time —

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"Want to bet?" he whispered at her.

She said, "Cyanide."

And although he laughed back at her, he knew that she was right — righter than she knew. For the time had already come and this was the end of Life Team No. 3.

They would go on, of course, stung by the challenge Henry Griffith had written in his notebook, still doggedly true to their training and their charge, but the heart was out of them, the fear and the prejudice too deeply ingrained within the soul of them, the confused tangle of their thinking too much a part of them.

If Henry Griffith had sought to sabotage the project, Lodge told himself, he had done it perfectly. In death he had done it far better than he could have living.

He seemed to hear in the room the dry, acerbic chuckling of the man and he wondered at the imagined chuckle, for Henry had had no humor in him.

Although Henry had been the Out-At-Elbows Philosopher and it was hard to think of Henry as that sort of character — an old humbug who hid behind a polished manner and a golden tongue. For there was nothing of the humbug in Henry, either, and his manner was not polished nor did he have the golden gift of words. He slouched and he rarely talked and when he did he growled.

A joker, Lodge thought — had he been, after all, a joker?

Could he have used the Philosopher to lampoon the rest of them, a character who derided them and they not knowing it?

He shook his head, arguing with himself.

If the Philosopher had kidded them, it had been gentle kidding, so gentle that none of them had known it was going on, so subtle that it had slid off them without notice.

But that wasn't the terrifying aspect of it — that Henry might have been quietly making fun of them. The terrifying thing was that the Philosopher had been second on the stage. He had followed the Rustic Slicker and during the whole time had been much in evidence — munching on the turkey leg and waving it to emphasize the running fire of pompous talk that had never slacked. The Philosopher had been, in fact, the most prominent player in the entire Play.

And that meant that no one could have put him on the stage, for no one, in the first place, could have known so soon which of the nine was Henry's character, and no one, not having handled him before, could have put the Philosopher so realistically through his paces. And none of those who had sent on their character early in the Play could have handled two characters

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convincingly for any length of time — especially when the Philosopher had talked all the blessed time.

And that would cancel out at least four of those sitting in the room.

Which could mean:

That there was a ghost.

Or that the machine itself retained a memory.

Or that the eight of them had suffered mass hallucination.

He considered that last alternative and it wilted in the middle.

So did the other two.

None of the three made sense.

Not any of it made sense — none of it at all.

Take a team of trained men and women, trained objectively, trained to look for facts, conditioned to skepticism and impatience of anything outside the pale of fact: What did it take to wreck a team like that? Not simply the cabin fever of a lonely asteroid. Not simply the nagging of awakened conscience against well established ethics. Not the atavistic, Transylvanian fear of ghosts.

There was some other factor.

Another factor that had not been thought of yet — like the new approach that Maitland had talked about at dinner, saying they would have to take a new direction to uncover the secret that they sought. We're going at it wrong, Maitland had said; we'll have to find a new approach.

And Maitland had meant, without saying so, that in their research the old methods of ferreting out the facts were no longer valid, that the scientific mind had operated for so long in the one worn groove that it knew no other, that they must seek some fresh concept to arrive at the fact of life.

Had Henry, Lodge wondered, supplied that fresh approach? And in the supplying of it and in dying, wrecked the team as well?

Or was there another factor, as Maitland had said there must be a new approach — a factor that did not fit in with conventional thinking or standard psychology?

The Play, he wondered.

Was the Play a factor?

Had the Play, designed to keep the team intact and sane, somehow turned into a two-edged sword?

They were rising from the table now, ready to leave, ready to go to their rooms and to dress for dinner. And after dinner, there would be the Play again.

Habit, Lodge thought. Even with the whole thing gone to pot, they still conformed to habit.

They would dress for dinner; they would stage the Play. They would go

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back tomorrow morning to their workrooms and they'd work again, but the work would be a futile work, for the dedicated purpose of their calling had been burned out of them by fear, by the conflict of their souls, by death, by ghosts.

Someone touched his elbow and he saw that Forester stood beside him.

"Well, Kent?"

"How do you feel?"

"Okay," said Lodge. Then he said, "You know, of course, it's over."

"We'll try again," said Forester.

Lodge shook his head. "Not me. You maybe. You're a younger man than I. I am burned out, too."

IX

The Play started in where it had left off the night before, with the Sweet Young Thing coming on the stage and all the others there, with the Out-At-Elbows Philosopher rubbing his hands together smugly and saying: "Now this is a cozy situation. All of us are here."

Sweet Young Thing (*tripping lightly*): Why, Philosopher, I know that I am late, but what a thing to say. Of course we all are here. I was unavoidably detained. . . .

Rustic Slicker (*speaking aside, with a rural leer*): By a Tom Collins and a slot machine. . . .

Alien Monster (*sticking out its head from behind the tree*): Tsk hrstlgn vglater, tsk. . . .

And there was something wrong, Lodge told himself.

There was a certain mechanical wrongness, something out of place, a horrifying alienness that sent a shiver through you even when you couldn't spot the alienness.

There was something wrong with the Philosopher, and the wrongness was not that he should not be there, but something else entirely. There was a wrongness about the Sweet Young Thing and the Proper Young Man and the Beautiful Bitch and all the others of them.

There was a great deal wrong with the Rustic Slicker, and he, Bayard Lodge, knew the Rustic Slicker as he knew no other man — knew the blood and guts and brains of him, knew his thoughts and dreams and his hidden yearnings, his clodhopperish conceit, his smart aleck snicker, the burning inferiority complex that drove him to social exhibitionism.

He knew him as every member of the audience must know his own character, as something more than an imagined person, as someone more than another person, something more than friend. For the bond was strong — the bond of the created and creator.

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And tonight the Rustic Slicker had drawn a little ways apart, had cut the apron strings, stood on his own with the first dawning of independence.

The Philosopher was saying: "It's quite natural that I should have commented on all of us being here. For one of us is dead. . . ."

There was no gasp from the audience, no hiss of indrawn breath, no stir, but you could feel the tension snap tight like a whining violin string.

"We have been consciences," said the Mustached Villain. "Projected conscience playing out our parts. . . ."

The Rustic Slicker said: "The consciences of mankind."

Lodge half rose out of his chair.

I didn't make him say that! I didn't want him to say that. I thought it, that was all. So help me God, I just thought it, that was all!

And now he knew what was wrong. At last, he knew the strangeness of the characters this night.

They weren't on the screen at all! They were on the stage, the little width of stage which ran before the screen!

They were no longer projected imaginations — they were flesh and blood. They were mental puppets come to sudden life.

He sat there, cold at the thought of it — cold and rigid in the quickening knowledge that by the power of mind alone — by the power of mind and electronic mysteries, Man had created life.

A new approach, Maitland had said.

Oh, Lord! A new approach!

They had failed at their work and triumphed in their play, and there'd be no longer any need of life teams, grubbing down into that gray area where life and death were interchangeable.

To make a human monster you'd sit before a screen and you'd dream him up, bone by bone, hair by hair, brains, innards, special abilities and all.

There'd be monsters by the billions to plant on those other planets. And the monsters would be human, for they'd be dreamed by brother humans working from a blueprint.

In just a little while the characters would step down off the stage and would mingle with them.

And their creators? What would their creators do? Go screaming, raving mad?

What would he say to the Rustic Slicker?

What *could* he say to the Rustic Slicker?

And, more to the point, what would the Rustic Slicker have to say to him?

He sat, unable to move, unable to say a word or cry out a warning, waiting for the moment when they would step down.

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We know a great many mystery novelists, western writers and other purveyors of popular fiction; and in all of these circles "a young writer" is anyone under 30. In the "serious" novel, youth extends to at least 39; a biographer or historian is considered young in his 40's; and an erudite academician may well be looked on as one of the younger men up until his retirement age. But science fiction is different; here it almost seems as if a man who reaches voting age without having published is hopelessly retarded. Robert Abernathy, true to this tradition, was born in 1924 and sold his first story in 1941; what's more, it proved to be a minor classic: Peril of the Blue World, *one of the cleverest of all alien-invasion variants. He's written disappointingly little since then, choosing to fiddle away his time on such trivial pastimes as taking a Harvard Ph.D. in Slavic Linguistics; but it's good news that he's now back in production again, with the same wit, ingenuity and readability plus (now that he's reached the venerable age of 29) a broader knowledge of human mores. Particularly, of course, the singular mores of Ph.D.'s and other denizens of Academe, whose foibles he now sets before you with a fine absurd logic.*

Professor Schlucker's Fallacy

by ROBERT ABERNATHY

PROFESSOR WOLFGANG SCHLUCKER was entertaining a fallacy — an amusement in which Professors of Philosophy occasionally indulge.

"Have a spot of tea," said the Professor.

"Don't mind if I do," said the fallacy.

It thrust its proboscis into the teapot and slurped noisily. The Professor regarded it with undisguised loathing. "Beg pardon," he said, "but I don't think I caught the name."

"I," said the fallacy, shrugging its eyestalks deprecatingly, "am a fallacy of extrapolation. See?" It extrapolated its fourth arm across the room and seized a handful of the Professor's cigars from the mantelpiece, where he had thought they were safe.

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"That's not what I meant," said the Professor testily. "Can you prove yourself inductively?"

"Nothing simpler," declared the fallacy, lighting cigars and puffing until it resembled an old-time ship of the line firing broadsides. "Statistics show that, during a period of 50 years, the average height of college entrants increased by 3 per cent. *Ergo*, the class of 2510 will average eight feet one inch in height; and by the year 3000 the incoming crop of freshmen will be upwards of eleven feet tall."

"Ha!" said the Professor, a crafty light coming into his eyes. If the fallacy had only been better acquainted with him, it would have thought twice before slurping his tea and looting his humidor. Professor Schlucker was renowned as an almost morbidly vindictive man. Not long since he had taken a peculiar and nerve-racking revenge upon a colleague who had poked fun at his criticism of Hegel: secretly obtaining a photograph of this person — a mild, bespectacled introvert — he made a great many copies in the University print shop, captioning them WANTED and appending a catalog of crimes ranging from bigamy to stagecoach robbery. These Schlucker surreptitiously tacked up in the local post offices; since then the unfortunate scholar had been picked up and grilled by the police every time he went to mail a letter.

On another occasion, Schlucker had demolished a rival by smuggling excerpts from the Marquis de Sade into the other's lecture notes for a class in Moral Philosophy. By the time the victim discovered what had happened, the lecture had already been recorded in 32 students' notebooks, and it was impossible to avert a scandal of seismic proportions.

But the fallacy did not know with what manner of man it had to deal. It smirked in fancied invulnerability, secure in the knowledge that its motley hide was syllogism-proof.

"Shall we take a turn in the fresh air?" suggested the Professor innocently.

The two of them strolled arm in arm across the campus; the Professor steered a seemingly aimless course, past the library, past the fishpond, toward the Physics building.

A buxom coed, walking with a scrawny freshman (5′ 9″), met them and greeted, "Hi, Muscles." She was not wearing her glasses, to avoid spoiling the view, and to her blurred vision there was something fetching about the fallacy's supernumerary arms. The fallacy leered back at her and extrapolated a curve. The coed squeaked, "Quit that!" and slapped the freshman, who tumbled into the adjacent fishpond, whence he was seined out by a brace of upperclassmen and fined for violation of Tradition No. 325, passed the previous afternoon, forbidding freshmen to swim in the pond with their clothes on.

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Meanwhile Professor Schlucker strode on his way oblivious, busily plotting the downfall of the fallacy trotting beside him.

His awareness that fallacies can be dangerous when roused did not deter him; danger was to him a heady drink. He thought with scorn of his acquaintances in the natural sciences; smugly entrenched in their stodgy world of fissionable nuclei, plasmagene mutations, neuroses and supernovae, they little knew the perils of metaphysics. . . . For example, there was the case of poor old Meerkat, who after 40 years of intensive deduction had arrived at a conclusive disproof of his own existence and had disappeared before he was able to publish, together with all records and memories pertaining to him. How Professor Schlucker knew of this incident is a mystery.

However, physical scientists sometimes have their uses, and this was such a time. Professor Schlucker paused in front of the Physics building. With a nonchalant air he struck a match on the statue of Lambert Bisley, the University's founder, and lit a cigar. Then he took a firm grip on his fallacy.

"Come on up," he urged ingratiatingly. "I want you to meet a friend of mine."

They entered the Physics laboratory. Professor Hornbeam, head of the department, looked up from the corner bench where he was tinkering with the wiring of his time machine.

"Oh, hello, Wolfgang," he greeted. He blinked uncertainly at the fallacy's anomalous protuberances. "Didn't know you were married, old man."

"I'm not," said Professor Schlucker. "This is a fallacy of mine. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to use your apparatus for a few minutes."

"By all means," Professor Hornbeam assented happily. He plugged in the device and watched ecstatically as its tubes warmed up.

"Allow me to introduce myself," said the fallacy. "During one half century the average height of college freshmen increased by a factor of .03. *Ergo* —"

"If you're going to be sick," said the physicist hastily, "please go outside."

The fallacy sulked. In the meantime, Professor Schlucker had cunningly made fast all the doors and windows of the laboratory. He faced the fallacy in triumph.

"Got you!" he sneered. "I purposely neglected to tell you that Professor Hornbeam here has just perfected his time machine!"

The fallacy blenched; its eyestalks swiveled wildly in search of an exit. It was trapped.

"No!" it shrieked. "Not *that!*"

"What's the matter?" queried Professor Hornbeam.

"According to *this* preposterous proposition," explained Professor Schlucker, "the freshman class of the year 3000 will average eleven feet

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tall. I intend to send it bodily into the year 3000. Arriving there, it will be confronted by empirical evidence — and it will automatically become an *exploded* fallacy."

But while the philosopher gloated, the desperate fallacy had stealthily extrapolated two yards of ankle. Abruptly it tripped Professor Schlucker so that he toppled backward into the operating field of the time machine, and simultaneously, with an extrapolated arm, it threw the sending switch.

With a gulping sound like that of an uprooted quahaug, the Professor vanished.

Professor Hornbeam pulled worriedly at his lower lip. "I didn't think *he* was going," he said.

"Neither did he," said the fallacy gleefully.

"But he can't ever get back," the physicist pointed out. "Since $g = k(t_1 - t_0)$, a time machine can only work one way."

"Yes," said the fallacy, stretching luxuriously. "Ain't nature grand?"

Professor Schlucker arose from the greensward where he had landed. He brushed himself and looked around. He was glad to see that at least he was still on the campus, and that the University, thanks to its mellow traditions and lack of funds, was but little changed in the year 3000; but he was acutely conscious of his predicament.

He stood on tiptoe to pluck at the sleeve of a passing freshman. "Excuse me," said the Professor, "but can you tell me — You see, I'm from 1953, and I'd like —"

"You want to see the Counselor for Temporal Maladjustment," said the freshman promptly. "Past those trees yonder — second quonset from the end." Without waiting for thanks, he stilted off, stepping carefully over the hedges in his path.

Professor Schlucker set out in the direction indicated, apprehensively dodging hurrying students. He was relieved to note that, though the members of the incoming class towered precisely as his fallacy had predicted, the sophomores rarely topped nine feet, the juniors were still smaller, and the seniors were generally under six feet tall; evidently the Faculty still knew how to cut them down to size in four years.

A little bitterly, he reflected that if he had been able to afford a television set on a Professor's salary, he would not have spent the afternoon entertaining a fallacy, and none of this would have happened.

The Counselor for Temporal Maladjustment was a wizened, rapid little man. "Yes? Yes?" he snapped. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"I seem," said Professor Schlucker, "to be badly maladjusted in a temporal sense —"

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"One moment!" said the Counselor briskly. He scribbled illegibly on a slip of paper and extended it to the visitor. "This prescription will fix you up. Get it filled and use as directed. Good day, sir."

A little dazed, the Professor stumbled out with the prescription clutched in his hand. Ten minutes later he was back, angrily brandishing a box of pills.

He snorted, "According to the directions, these pills will produce suspended animation for periods of from 10 to 10,000 years as desired. Now what —"

"Isn't that what you wanted?" said the Counselor. "If you're maladjusted in the present era, you have your choice of any number of future periods."

"But I," said Professor Schlucker, "came here via time machine from 1953, and I want to get back!"

"Dear me!" The Counselor for Temporal Maladjustment looked dashed. "That's impossible; ever since Hornbeam's pioneer researches, everybody has known that time travel only works one way. . . ." Suddenly the Counselor snapped his fingers. "But now that I remember, we have a graduate student, a bright young fellow named Smith or Jones, who's making a study of Hornbeam's original equations. If anybody can understand your problem, he can."

They found the graduate student dug in behind a parapet of books in the library stacks. He was less than five feet tall, and stoop-shouldered to boot. "Professor Schlucker, Mr. Smith or Jones," said the Counselor. "Professor Schlucker came here from the Twentieth Century via Hornbeam's original time machine, and he's anxious to return. I wondered if —"

The graduate sniffed. "He can't be here in the first place. I've just found an error in Hornbeam's equations. Hornbeam believed that his apparatus only made it possible to travel into the future; actually, since $g = k\,(t_0 - t_1)$, it is only possible to travel into the *past.*"

Professor Schlucker found himself in the heart of a virgin wilderness. Naturally, since Smith or Jones had proved that time travel only worked backwards, he was just as far in the past as he would have been in the future had the machine worked as Hornbeam intended. Elementary arithmetic showed that it must be the year 906, some centuries before Lambert Bisley was to deflower the wilderness and found the University.

A physical scientist might have been rattled by this turn of events, but not a Full Professor of Philosophy. Immediately realizing his situation, he first of all looked warily round for Indians, but none were about — 906 being fortunately one of the few years for which no anthropologist had

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found it necessary to postulate a North-to-South migration passing through this area.

There was still the problem of the time separating Professor Schlucker from his rightful present, but fortunately he still had the box of Thirtieth-Century suspended animation pills. He found a comfortable spot under an oak tree, counted out enough of the pills to suspend his animation for exactly 1047 years according to the directions on the box, and methodically swallowed them.

When consciousness returned, the Professor was standing in an awkward pose in front of the Physics building. Looking down, he perceived that he was perched on the pedestal belonging to the statue of Lambert Bisley — that, in fact, he *was* the statue of Lambert Bisley. Unearthed 50 years earlier in his cataleptic state beneath a coating of alluvial deposits, he had been mistaken for the masterpiece of an Early American sculptor, restored with fresh plaster, and placed in his present location by order of the Board of Regents.

Making sure he was not observed, Professor Schlucker dropped the torch of learning he had been holding aloft and climbed stiffly down off the pedestal, reflectively rubbing the spot where he had scratched a match on himself an hour earlier. Walking gingerly so that his plaster would not fall off and leave him embarrassingly exposed, he had gone only a few steps when inspiration struck him, and he veered toward the Administration building.

Past a fluttered secretary he marched statuesquely into the President's office. The President clutched the edge of his desk, eyes bulging with awe-struck recognition. "Lambert Bisley!" he gasped.

"See here, Prexy," said the stone guest in sepulchral tones, "I've been keeping an eye on this institution — how could I help it? — and there are one or two things I should like to see corrected."

"Anything you say, Founder," gulped the President.

"Firstly," said the pseudo-Bisley, "you have a Professor of Philosophy here. Name of Schlucker. Brilliant fellow. Grossly underpaid."

"I'll attend to it at once," stammered the President.

"And secondly," Professor Schlucker began — only to realize that any second request would be an anticlimax and might, indeed, imperil the certain fulfillment of the first. Cryptically he wheeled and strode out of the office.

He found the fallacy, as he had suspected he would, lecturing to his class in Medieval Thought. None of the 27 students had noticed the difference.

The Professor stalked into the classroom, shedding plaster. "So!" he gritted.

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"So?" echoed the fallacy abashedly.

"In the year 3000," said Professor Schlucker deliberately, "the college freshmen *are* eleven feet tall. *Ergo*, you, sir, are no fallacy. You are merely an invalid inference." He half-turned and beckoned. "Take it away, boys!"

Two assistants from the Infirmary marched in with a stretcher. The miserable ex-fallacy attempted to extrapolate itself out the window, but, being invalid, it could barely crawl. It was bundled onto the stretcher and carried out to become a charity case under treatment for an undistributed middle.

By now Professor Schlucker was only slightly plastered. Nothing daunted, however, he took up his accustomed stance before his class.

"Now, as I was saying —" he began.

The 27 students wrote rapidly in their 27 notebooks: *Now, as I was saying —*

STRANGE FOLK, INDEED!

All sorts of odd personages show up in the pages of F&SF for December (on stands in early November). We think you'll be fascinated by the cryptic, beautifully tailored gentleman from our far future and the puzzle he presents in *Two-Way Stretch*, by G. Gordon Dewey & Max Dancey. Another short novelet, *The Gastronomical Error*, by H. Nearing, Jr., details the sudden appearance of a lovely Venusian to that precious pair, Professors Ransom & MacTate. As this exquisite young creature is all things to all men she should be very much to your taste.

Short stories, too, produce the weird and wondrous in characters. Arthur Porges, possibly a bit tired of aliens fictionally conquering earth, writes a hilarious satire of all such, *The Liberator*, and comes up with the damnedest emancipator yet to appear in science fiction! William Lindsay Gresham, in his *The Dream Dust Factory*, gives a haunting account of the loveliness that suddenly appeared in a convict's cell, and that "old pro," Robert Moore Williams, writes persuasively not only of the people but of the mighty machines that might be found on Mars in his *Aurochs Came Walking*.

Others to bewilder the unwary have been created by Guy DeAngelis, Jerome Barry, Esther Carlson, and Zenna Henderson. All in all, it's an assemblage of beings calculated to tax even the imagination of a Sir John Mandeville!

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It is to be hoped that human explorers of interstellar space will realize as fully as does Miss Seabright that a culture completely alien to man can be totally misinterpreted by him.

The Altruists

by IDRIS SEABRIGHT

IN AN ATTEMPT to convey the maximum of information in the minimum of space, the *Guide to High Galactic Latitude Planetary Systems* is printed on preemtex as thin as gossamer, and its letter-press consists almost exclusively of conventional symbols. Even so, it occupies three huge volumes. The planet Skōs receives half a line in the second of these.

Malcom Knight was reading the item about Skōs for the tenth time, frowning with the effort of translating the difficult symbology. "Skōs," he read, "sole satellite of long-period eclipsing binary, components red and blue-white. (For primaries' details see appropriate listing in Volume III.) Mass 9/10 earth normal, radius 11/10. Breathable air, drinkable water. Climate mild, uniform, equable. Three land masses. Inhabited by native nonhumanoid race, slurb, extremely friendly and hospitable. Restricted planet, landing only by permit. Coordinates . . ."

Malcom shut the book softly. He showed his long white teeth. The "restricted planet" entry meant only that the authorities felt that the "extremely friendly and hospitable" slurb might get the short end of the stick in casual contacts with human beings. Restrictions never applied to emergency landings, like his was going to be.

He had learned about Skōs by accident two years ago. A messmate of his, Charley Crane, had gone there with a landing party from the old *Euphrosyne*, and been much impressed with the place. He had praised not so much the physical beauty of the planet — though, to hear Charley tell it, it was an earthly paradise — as he had the character of the slurb.

"They're the kindest, most obliging, most hospitable creatures you ever saw in your life," he had said. "They seem to get a genuine kick out of doing anything at all they can for you. Why, if they'd had women we wanted — they didn't, of course, and nobody knows how they reproduce — we could have had them, and welcome."

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"Um," Malcom had said.

"But outside of that . . . They brought us fruits and nuts and meat. The fruit was delicious. They waited on us hand and foot. They washed and mended our clothes as well as they could. They cleaned our shoes. They heated water for us to bathe in, and they'd have bathed us too, if we'd let them. Anything we wanted, they did."

"How did you let them know what you wanted?" Malcom had asked.

"Oh, telepathy. You spoke in English, rather slowly, and they got the idea. By the end of our visit, they were talking a little English themselves."

"It sounds pretty good," Malcom had said cautiously.

"It was, for the first week. Even now I like to remember the first week. After that — I dunno. But you got sick of it."

"Why?" Malcom had wanted to know.

"It's hard to explain. But knowing that somebody would lie down and die if he thought it would give you any pleasure makes you end up hating him. It's not a natural thing. It makes you want to tear him up into little bits.

"Can't you understand that, Mal? Maybe you can't. I always thought you had more the Dictator and Slave complex than anybody I ever knew."

"Never mind about that," Malcom had said.

And now here he was, roughly about a thousand miles above the upper atmosphere of Skōs, getting ready to land. Crane's words had roused a hankering in him, or made a hankering conscious of which he had been only dimly aware. It seemed to him that the slurb could give him something he'd been looking for all his life.

Altruism. Because, when you came down to it, nobody was altruistic. Parents, teachers, employers, officers, messmates — they all wanted something from you. If anybody did anything nice for you, he wanted to be paid for it.

Even girls. Girls said they loved you, but they wanted something for it. If it wasn't presents and good times — and it almost always was — they still wanted fun for themselves. In a situation where a decent woman should have been satisfied if you were happy, they wanted to be happy too. Sometimes they complained. It was disgusting. No wonder he didn't care much for girls.

But if Charley had been telling the truth, with the slurb it would be different. For the two weeks or so before the rescue ship came for him, he'd have a complete vacation. A vacation from human selfishness.

The little monocraft was spiraling down lightly. Malcom took a universal coordinate grid and began to jimmy it about over the emerging land masses

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of Skōs. He didn't think there'd be any trouble about his landing; he was almost sure there would not. He had the reputation aboard his ship, the *Tyche*, of being a steady and reliable element, a little rigid and overdisciplined. More than that, the monocraft wasn't expensive. Everyone knew its meteor shielding was far from thorough. For both those reasons his story of a quick, unexpected meteor which had pierced the imperviskin, endangering his air supply and making a planetary landing imperative, would be easily believed. The investigation about the wreck would be a formality.

Yes, he could get away with it. His task in the monocraft — plotting asteroid orbits around Skōs' double primary — made the story inherently probable. The asteroid project had been undertaken more for disciplinary reasons — to give the ratings something to do — than because it was of immediate vital interest. His messmates would congratulate him on not having been killed when the meteor broke the imperviskin. He'd enjoy a delightful little two weeks' vacation at the taxpayers' expense.

He glanced at the battery of gauges, and saw that the one that indicated air pressure within the cabin was falling rapidly. He'd better hurry. He didn't want to get into any real danger in carrying out his plan. He sent the monocraft into a faster whirl.

When Malcom reached the slurb village he was winded and irritable. He had sighted the village from the air, but had not dared set his craft down close to it. He was afraid that such convenient proximity might tend to belie his story of emergency and haste. So he had set up the automatic signaller — the rescue ship should come, he calculated, in not less than twelve or more than fourteen days — and then struck out across country toward the village. The country, though open and park-like, was dotted with thickets of some spiny-leaved sharp-thorned shrub. Malcom had his choice of clawing his way through the thickets, or of making unending detours. He had detoured; but to travel a distance of five miles, he had had to walk fifteen. The double red and white sun was high in the sky.

He stood looking at the village in silence. It was not impressive — a cluster of mud-plastered huts, in the shape of a segmented circle, around a slowly oozing spring. The spring ran out across a bed of clay that gave place to a swampy expanse of mud. There were humps that looked like submerged boulders in the mud. Around the village there was a fence, with an opening in one side, of the same spiny shrub he had already encountered.

Still Malcom was silent. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that an earth-type planet usually had a surprisingly close resemblance to earth. Except for the double sun in the sky, he might have been at home in the temperate zone on a pleasant day in early fall.

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He put his hands to his lips and drew a deep breath. "Hey in there!" he bellowed. "Hurry up! Come on out!"

There was a stir within one of the huts. Then a slurb emerged.

Malcom's first reaction was of surprise that the *Guide* had called the slurb "nonhumanoid." His second was a nauseated recognition of what "nonhumanoid" meant.

The slurb had two arms, two legs, and a head; so has a lizard, and a lizard isn't human. It stood upright; so does a woodchuck, on occasion. It had two eyes in the front of its face, so its vision was probably binocular. But the slurb wasn't human, it wasn't even humanoid.

Perhaps it was the slurb's girth, which was enormous. The creature was literally as wide as it was tall. Perhaps it was the fact that it had a series of extra joints along the shoulder girdle and down the upper arm, so that its arms moved with the seemingly boneless flexibility of snakes. Perhaps it was the color of its sleek integument, which was a dirty off-white. Perhaps . . . Anyhow, the slurb was nonhumanoid.

Malcom inhaled shudderingly. He felt a disgust that had a moralistic tone. His anger fixed for a moment on Charley Crane — Charley, who had said that the slurb were funny but you soon got used to them — and then fastened firmly on the slurb. He drew his blaster from its holder. Was it for this he'd wrecked the monocraft, risked an investigation and possible prison? But wait — he might get into trouble if he blasted. Skōs was a restricted planet, after all. He'd give the slurb a chance.

"Get me something to eat," he said in loud, slow tones. "Be quick. And then heat water for a bath."

The slurb stood motionless. Malcom fingered his blaster. For a moment the slurb's fate — though not in the sense Malcom would have meant the phrase — hung in the balance. Then the slurb clasped its hands together behind its shoulder blades. It arched backward; the gesture seemed to be meant as a bow. It turned with surprising rapidity and went into the hut. It came back almost immediately with its hands full of purplish fruit.

Malcom enjoyed the next few days. Charley had been right, you soon got used to the funny looks of the slurb. They were no more disturbing than a lot of peculiar looking robots would have been. But the pleasure, the satisfaction, he got from their constant solicitous attention was unlike anything any conceivable robot could have afforded. It was — he could think of no other word for it — it was wonderful.

They made him a hut, bigger and better than any of theirs. They laid a bed for him of plushy sweet-scented forest boughs. They brought him delicious fruit and strange but savory meats. (Their cuisine was excellent.)

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They bathed him, they even shaved him with delicate care. But it wasn't their attentions, pleasant though these were in themselves; it was the spirit in which the slurb offered their services. They seemed to live only to please Malcom Knight.

Malcom felt like a man who, dying of thirst, has filled his belly with the precious stuff and now lies blissfully plunged in the cool sweet liquid.

So it went for four days. On the fifth something deeper in him awoke.

Charley Crane had got sick of the slurb's attentions; what Malcom felt was not disgust but a sadistic curiosity.

How far would they go? Would they still like it, still sacrifice themselves to you, when what you asked them to do hurt? Something made him refrain from the worst outrages. Perhaps it was the fear of putting an end to a very good thing, perhaps it was the knowledge that if the slurb were obviously marked and damaged when the rescue ship arrived, he might have to answer for it. But on the sixth day he invented The Game.

It began innocently enough. He had the slurb line up — there were twenty-one of them, all, to his eyes, identical — while he threw gobs of mud at them. By the end of an hour he was throwing rocks at them with all his strength.

He made up a little score card. If he hit the slurb in the face, it counted ten. If he hit it in the chest, it counted three. If he hit the slurb on the knee — for some reason they were very sensitive about their knees — it counted fifteen. If he missed the slurb entirely, it had to go without its dinner. He was always trying to better his scores.

They did not dodge or protest. Sometimes when he got a whanger in on a knee they winced a little. He discovered that if you propel a rock toward a slurb by a blaster at minimum discharge, the wince is much more.

He began to have ideas. Weren't there people, people with money, who would get a great deal of pleasure out of the slurb? He thought there were. He was due for discharge from the patrol next year; if he could arrange to get a private ship . . . And it wasn't as if the slurb would mind being sold to such people. They would enjoy it.

He slept late on the morning of the tenth day. The sky seemed gloomy and overcast, not much light was coming in through the door of his hut.

He yawned and stretched, turning luxuriously on his plushy couch. His plans in regard to the slurb had crystallized; in a year or two, at the most, he'd be back in a private ship and take a cargo of them off. There would be difficulties, of course. The whole thing would be ticklish. But the notion of having a cargo of slurb to sell had developed an unexpected business acumen in him. He was sure he could surmount the difficulties. It was just a question of knowing whom to bribe.

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He rolled over on his side, wondering whether to try to sleep a little more. No, he was slept out. It was too bad that he'd have only a few more days with the slurb. But he could think of a lot of interesting variations of The Game in those days.

Meantime, he was getting hungry. He'd have breakfast. Without moving from his bed, he bellowed, "Breakfast! Bath water! Hurry up!"

The seconds passed. There was no response.

Surprise made Malcom sit up. Once more he bellowed, "Breakfast! Damn it, hurry up!"

Still there was no response. Snorting with fury — he'd *fix* them, when they played The Game — he pulled on his pants, stuck his feet in his shoes, and went out.

The first thing that struck him was that the day was remarkably dark. Involuntarily he glanced toward the sky. The suns were well up, but only about half the disk of the white one was visible. The bigger dull red luminary was occluding it.

An eclipse, he supposed. Well, he'd think about it later. Meantime, where were those stinking god-damned slurb?

He looked in a hut and a hut and another hut. No slurb. He finally caught sight of them squatting in a symmetrical double square around the spring. They had plastered themselves with mud until they were nearly invisible. One slurb was sitting in the middle, almost on top of the spring.

Were they trying to hide from him? And in that limp-brain way? "Get up!" he shouted furiously. "Get to work!"

The slurb in the middle raised its head and looked at him. Its eyes were glassy and blank, and he could not tell whether it actually perceived him or not. Then its head dropped forward on its breast.

Malcom aimed a hard kick at the nearest slurb. He heard the whack as his foot connected with its ribs. It rolled with the impact and then crawled back an inch or two. It gave no other sign.

Malcom fingered his blaster. Would a jolt or two at medium discharge liven them up? But there was only a little juice left in the weapon by now, and it frightened him to think what he'd do if it didn't work.

In the end, he went back to his hut. He was hungry, angry, and a little afraid. The slurb's sudden inertia seemed contrary to the course of nature. And the day was getting darker and darker.

He sat on his bed for a while, swearing and cracking his knuckles. Then he went through the huts. He managed to get together a passable breakfast of somewhat overripe fruit. He had no idea where the slurb got the fruit from. How long would they be like this?

About noon he heard a noise outside. He went to the door opening and

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looked out hopefully. The whole twenty-one slurb were coming toward him, so mud-plastered as to be almost invisible. In both their hands they were carrying — Malcom squinted, to make sure in the heavy twilight — in both hands they were carrying big branches of the spiny shrub.

They stopped in front of his hut. There was a second's pause. Then the slurb in front said, in an oddly human voice, "Come on out."

For a moment Malcom was so surprised at the thing's having spoken English — they had never done anything except twitter and whoop at each other before — that he ignored the meaning of the words. Then he showed his teeth in a grin. Come out? When they were carrying those nasty branches? What kind of a fool did they take him for?

"Come out," the slurb repeated. To Malcom's ears the words were heavy with menace. Without any hesitation he twisted the dial on his blaster to full discharge and fired at the leading slurb. It was self-defense; they were obviously in a treacherous mood. Perhaps The Game yesterday had been a little too rough.

The slurb fell over. It kicked and writhed for an instant, and then lay still. It was probably dead.

That would show them. They had no way of knowing there was only the tiniest bit of juice left in his blaster. They'd think twice before they'd tell him to come out again.

He drew back within the hut. He was not as frightened as he might have been; the episode had a dreamlike, unreal quality. He even felt hopeful. Perhaps, now that he had shown the slurb who was boss, they'd go back to being their normal selves.

He was roused from his optimism by a crackling noise in his rear. He looked round in sudden instinctive fright. My God! Those devils! They'd set the hut on fire!

Whatever they were going to do to him, it couldn't be any worse than fire. In the thick dusk he saw that they had withdrawn from around the door opening. The hut was full of smoke and heat. The roof was beginning to burn. In sudden undignified haste Malcom plunged out of the hut.

The slurb closed in around him. In the glare of the burning shelter, their faces were impassive and glassy-eyed. They began to prod and lash at him with the spiny branches. Malcom was still wearing nothing but his trousers and his shoes. "Move," one of the slurb said. Malcom moved.

They prodded him toward the opening in the fence around the village. Was that all they had in mind, to get rid of him? Malcom, despite the painful lacerations his flanks and back were receiving, could have laughed in his relief. When they got him to the gap and all jabbed at him simultaneously with their branches, he went through almost with alacrity.

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They did not pursue him. When he was ten feet or so from the hole in the fence, he looked back. The slurb were plainly visible, silhouetted against the glare of the burning hut. They were busily filling in the gap in the spiny fence with thorny branches, and binding it together with vines.

He could, he supposed, do something. He toyed with the idea of setting their damned fence on fire. But then they would come after him again, and this time . . . No, he was lucky all they had done was push him out.

All the same, he was in an unpleasant fix. He couldn't stun anything larger than a weasel with the residual charge in his blaster, he had no shelter, and no immediate prospect of food. He wasn't even wearing a shirt. He felt a sudden passionate anger against Charley Crane, who had misled him so about the nature of the slurb. When the rescue ship came, he'd see what he could do about getting a punitive expedition organized against them. He would only have to tamper a little with the truth.

When the rescue ship . . . Oh. *Oh.* He suddenly perceived that he was in something considerably worse than an unpleasant fix. He had left a message in the automatic signaller, saying that he was taking shelter in the nearest slurb village. The rescuers would look for him there first. And when they found he wasn't there —

There was only one thing to do. He must get to the signaller. And wait there patiently until rescue came.

It was the only thing. He had to do it. But how in hell was he going to find the signaller in the dark?

For a moment Malcom felt despair. Then he brightened. Finding the signaller wasn't, after all, the only thing he could do. If he went a little farther into the parkland — he didn't want to stay too near the village, for fear the slurb would decide to attack him more decisively this time — if he went a little further, he could build a signal fire. There wasn't any immediate hurry about it, since the ship wasn't due for a couple of days. The slurb might change their minds before then. And if they didn't, his fire would be plainly visible from the air.

His self-confidence had come back. He even whistled softly as he walked away from the village. If only it weren't so damned dark. The light of the dim red sun did not illuminate; it made objects swim in a thick, depressing haze.

He'd make a camp. Sometimes it rained at night, and there was no sense in getting wet unnecessarily. He'd make a small fire, for comfort and warmth. And he ought to be able to find enough fruit, of one or another of the sorts the slurb had brought him, to get by.

He settled on a spot about a mile from the slurb village, an open space in front of a group of large-leaved trees. The country here was wooded,

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almost a forest in spots, and he had no difficulty in getting together a large pile of dry branches for his fire. He was less successful with his lean-to shelter, but it would, he supposed, keep off the worst of a heavy downpour. Oh, well. The rescue ship would be here at the latest in four days. *Damn* the slurb.

Now, food. He'd better make a small fire so he could find his way back to his camp. He stumbled about in the murk for an hour or so, his stomach growling, but in the bad light all the trees looked alike. He was just about to give up and return empty to his shelter when he found a lone tree covered with big mushy globes.

He picked all he could carry and took them back to his fire. In the ruddy light he saw that they were, as he had hoped, an orange fruit, rather like a persimmon, the slurb had given him once or twice. He wouldn't starve, anyway.

Now he could begin to wait. The red sun was almost on the horizon. In a little while it would be quite dark.

He piled branches on his fire. Slowly, to make it last, he peeled and ate two of the orange fruit. They were rather tasteless, but remarkably filling. He yawned. His belly was full, he'd had a hard day, and the warmth of the fire was making him sleepy. The *Guide* had not mentioned any dangerous animals on Skōs. He had time to kill. He slept.

He was wakened by a sudden intense stab of visceral pain. The sensation was so urgent and unexpected that it brought him bolt upright even before his eyes opened, in automatic defense.

He looked about him, sweating, his hand on his blaster. The slurb — an attack — he'd been wounded — those devils — they — But his fire was burning calmly and brightly, his body was intact, and nothing moved in the forest. No, wait. Wasn't there a shimmer of . . . something . . . just at the edge of the circle of light made by his fire? Under the branches?

He leaned forward, peering urgently. No, it must have been his imagination. There was nothing visible except the light of his fire.

But in that case, what had happened? Had the orange fruit he had eaten griped him? But it hadn't been a pain like that, it had been like something from the outside and yet subjective. It had been as if his body had suffered without a visible wound or lesion, and yet from the outside.

In the end, he decided that he must have had a nightmare. He piled the fire high with branches, and sat down with his back against a tree trunk. But it was a long time before he went back to sleep.

Next day the white sun was still in eclipse. What ailed the thing, anyhow? He'd never heard of an eclipse lasting that long. Malcom spent the morning assembling an enormous pile of branches, the afternoon stripping

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the tree of all its ripe fruit. It was a long, dull day. There was no sign of the slurb.

When the final darkness came on, he felt restless and uneasy. He told himself that it was because he was hungry; the orange fruit made him feel stuffed, but left him unsatisfied. He built a big fire, much larger than the one last night, and sat as close to it as he could get, finding, in its searing warmth, a certain relief of his nervousness.

Four or five hours after sundown, at what would have been 10 or 11 o'clock, he felt a second stab of the pain.

Malcom's eyes darted uncertainly from side to side. His hand moved to his belly, to his head. Where had he been attacked? He was wide awake, his fire was blazing brightly, nothing had come near him. Had his brain received a message of pain, and given it to his body to feel?

He was drenched with sweat. Oh, he must have caught some fever, be coming down with a serious disease. It would have been a relief for him to think so. No, this was an infliction from without. And there was something oddly, inexplicably familiar in it. Not in the pain itself, whose intensity was altogether outside of his experience. But it was as if the impulses, the motives behind the pain had somehow had their origin with him.

A shimmer in the air between the firelight and the trees caught his eye. He stared at it with frightened apprehension. He was imagining — yes — no, he wasn't. Something impalpable was in motion in the air under the trees.

The moments passed. The shimmer was unmistakable now. The forest began to shiver and dance.

Its contours shifted and wavered while the branches softly dripped pale gold. They came back to solidity and then were gone once more in shimmering motion. Even the firelight began to quiver. As the dance continued, Malcom had the sudden wild idea that the forest was alive with mental force.

Mental force? Were the trees mental trees? He was seized by an abrupt stabbing paroxysm of pain in his chest. It hurt too much for him to be able to shriek. When he came out of it, the air was momentarily still. In his brief freedom he wondered: whose mental force?

The next attack was in the pit of his stomach, the one after that in his bladder and bowels. He vomited, he soiled himself. He lay in his own mess, filthy and miserable. This time, under the pain — and it made him sicker than the pain had — he sensed a thin edge of pleasure. It was not his pleasure, not even pleasure in his suffering. But it was there. Someone was enjoying himself very much.

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The night wore on. The attacks, always more agonizing, came in long jets of pain and seemed to involve every part of his body indifferently. He thought it rained toward morning. He thought his fire went out.

The day came. It was brighter than yesterday, as the red sun withdrew slowly from the white primary. But it was not until late afternoon that Malcom could rouse himself to eat a little and try to clean himself. He was too weak to collect branches or try to kindle a fire. He looked forward to the coming night with sickening dread.

The torment began early, almost as soon as the sun had gone down. But except at first, it was not as bad as last night. That was not because the paroxysms of pain were less, but because they were so intense that Malcom was very soon delirious. Somebody was suffering, writhing and convulsed. Somebody shrieked, time after time. Somebody wondered how he could stand so much. It was not he.

A little before daybreak he fell into a coma. And then, instead of the nightmare glimpses of himself as he screamed and babbled and raved there was only a dark pit. Just before it closed over him he thought he saw an arc of light in the sky.

They came for him at last. It was a little before noon. He was conscious, but too exhausted to do anything more than open his eyes. Tenderly they lifted him in their boneless arms and carried him back to the village. They had built a new hut for him. They laid him on the plushy, fragrant bed and bathed his dirty body expertly.

On the second day Malcom had them carry him out of the hut. He was tormented by worry about the rescue ship. It ought to have been here by now. When the slurb were not quite as quick in obeying his command to carry him out as he thought they should be, he cursed at them — weakly, but in quite the old style.

When he was outside, he scanned the sky anxiously. No, there was nothing. He hadn't really expected to see anything — even if he had known where to look for the ship, he couldn't have picked it up without a scope.

He sighed. "Take me back," he said to his slurb. "No, wait. What's that, over on the other side of the spring? Take me there."

He had seen a flash of white. Eagerly and gently they obeyed him. When he got to the spot he saw that the white thing was a cross, made of two pieces of wood. On it somebody had painted his name, Malcom Knight, and his age, 29, in black paint.

For a moment he didn't understand. The rescue ship — had — that arc in the sky he remembered — had the ship — Then he turned on the slurb, raging. "You filth! You stinking, stinking filth! Damn you, damn you. Why did you lie to them?"

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There was a second's silence. Then one of the slurb stepped forward. "They didn't like you, master. They wanted to hear you had died. We wanted them to be happy. We told them what would please."

Rage and despair fought against his weakness. He picked up a rock and threw it at them. He hit a knee. He threw again and again. In the end he fainted, and they had to carry him back to the hut.

It was nearly dark when he recovered consciousness. A slurb came in as soon as he called, with a bowl of delicious-smelling soup. Malcom pushed it aside. He had to know.

"Tell me," he said to the slurb, "why you brought me back from the forest. Why did you drive me out in the first place? Why didn't you take the men from the rescue ship to me? I want to know."

"Yes, master," said the slurb obediently. It was silent, as if arranging its thoughts. "You see, master, we lay eggs."

"Eggs?" Malcom felt anger rising in him again.

"Yes, master. Whenever the red sun hides the white one, we lay eggs. That is what the lumps are, out in the mud."

"Well? What has your laying eggs got to do with your driving me out?"

"When we lay eggs, we want to be by ourselves. Oh, it was a good egg-laying, master. There were never so many eggs before, so much wonderful pleasure in it. We drove you out to be by ourselves. We didn't tell the men where you were because we knew they didn't want to find you. And we brought you back because we knew we owed that lovely egg-laying to *you*.

"You are so strong, so ordering. When men order us about, it makes us lay more eggs. We would always lay them, of course, but not so many. That is why we like visitors. We soak up their pleasure when they order us or hurt us, as you did with the rocks. And we give their pleasure out again when we lay eggs."

Malcom sank back on his bed. He felt too sick for rage. Those paroxysms of pain in the forest — the horrid familiarity of what he had experienced — the feeling of pleasure underneath — oh, God. Charley Crane had said the slurb were telepathic. This was telepathy carried to its final limits. Their hospitality, their altruism — the slurb were psychic cannibals.

The slurb bent over him anxiously. "Are you well, master? Give me an order, or throw a rock at me. Enjoy yourself. It will make the next egg-laying better."

Malcom shook his head feebly. *Next* egg-laying? He couldn't survive even the first night of another one. He'd be through.

Slurb began to enter the hut. They lined up around his bed. Anxiously and tenderly they regarded him, their boneless arms clasped behind their backs. "We only want you to be happy," chorused the slurb.

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Mindret Lord, film writer, mystery novelist, contributor to innumerable magazines, here writes of a venerable old physician and his one patient, a fantastically inept old lady whose ailments were never recorded in the Journal *of the American Medical Association.*

Dr. Jacobus Meliflore's Last Patient

by MINDRET LORD

AFTER A LONG and reasonably successful career, Dr. Jacobus Meliflore finally retired from medical practice at the age of 70. In doing so, he cut himself off not only from active practice, but from all contact with his profession; gradually he forgot much of what he had known, and he never learned, nor wanted to learn, anything at all about modern theories or techniques. During the next fifteen years he devoted himself with passionate zeal to constructing in miniature the great Gothic cathedrals. Rheims required four years; Chartres, six; and at the end of the following five years, Notre Dame de Paris was still far from completion. The doctor worked in clay, casting each detail separately in plaster — a difficult, exacting process, demanding skill and infinite patience. The delicate flying arches and pinnacles were apt to crack or crumble at a touch. But the many failures and disasters detracted nothing from the doctor's joy. He was delighted with his work and he sharply resented anything that interfered with it. At 85, all his friends had died long since, but such was his preoccupation that he had scarcely noticed their going. So long as Mrs. Stane, his housekeeper, gave him his meals and kept out of his way, he was content. And Mrs. Stane served him well; she liked and respected him, she had been with him close to 30 years, and she was to inherit his comfortable house and savings. On the whole, Dr. Meliflore's retirement was more peaceful and happy than can easily be imagined.

Actually, the only emergency that was ever allowed to interrupt Dr. Meliflore's architectural labors was the illness or indisposition of Miss Eugenia Latterly. Though she had never seen the woman, Mrs. Stane did not approve of Miss Latterly. Miss Latterly's voice on the telephone was

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imperious and demanding. Miss Latterly never paid any bills (the doctor never sent any, but also, he never had any more money in his pockets when he came home than when he left). And, above all, Mrs. Stane's distrust was due to the very unorthodox nature of Miss Latterly's complaints.

When Miss Latterly called (it rarely happened more than once a year or so), Mrs. Stane relayed the message to the doctor who would always be up to his knees and elbows in clay or plaster. He would sigh, rub the top of his bald head distractedly, and say, "Is that woman still alive? Well, Mrs. Stane, send for a conveyance." He would dress himself in clothing which had been suitable and proper to a physician perhaps half a century earlier, clap on his head a tall black hat that, with the loss of his hair, had gradually become too large for him, and, carrying a tattered, dusty leather bag, set off on the journey to his sole remaining patient.

In an hour or two he would be back, stripping off his hat and coat as Mrs. Stane opened the front door. Without pausing, he would start back to his cathedral. Mrs. Stane would ask, "What was it this time, Doctor?" "Oh, she was bitten by a bat." "A *bat*, Doctor!" "Oh, yes. Quite painful." And he would be gone beyond further questioning.

Sometimes, later in the day, or at dinner, Mrs. Stane would attempt to discover more about Miss Latterly's case, but invariably the doctor was too absorbed by his own interests to satisfy her curiosity.

On one occasion when Dr. Meliflore returned from his patient's bedside, he mentioned that Miss Latterly was suffering a touch of sulphur poisoning. "But you take sulphur with molasses," Mrs. Stane objected. "I didn't know it was poisonous." "It is when you breathe too much of it," the doctor said, shedding his collar and tie as he climbed the stairs.

Another time, even Dr. Meliflore had seemed a trifle dubious. At least, unless Mrs. Stane's hearing was at fault, he had muttered something to the effect that "Of course, the disease was common enough among goats, but so far as he knew Miss Latterly was the only human being on record who'd —." The end of the report was lost as the doctor closed the door of his workroom, and Mrs. Stane could never persuade him to return to the subject. At the time, he was much too involved with the intricacies of the rounded chevet at the east end of the Notre Dame.

Again, upon returning from a call, Dr. Meliflore remarked, "This time the idiotic woman's managed to get herself branded." "Branded?" asked Mrs. Stane. "Surely you mean burned, Doctor?" "Branded," Dr. Meliflore repeated. "Painful, I suppose, but only superficial. Help me with this scarf, will you, Mrs. Stane?" On the whole, perhaps it was not so very odd that Mrs. Stane disapproved of Miss Latterly.

On an especially bitter day in mid-winter, Miss Latterly telephoned

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and in her stiff, uncompromising way, commanded that the doctor come immediately. Mrs. Stane felt that she was amply justified in replying, "I really don't think it's possible, Miss Latterly. Why don't you call another physician? The doctor's too old, and this weather is so bad —" "You tell Dr. Meliflore I wish to see him at once! That's all, my good woman!" And Miss Latterly hung up.

Mrs. Stane obediently delivered the message, though she was extremely annoyed and determined not to let the doctor venture out of the house. "You really can't go, Doctor. You mustn't. Just let me call her back and tell her."

Dr. Meliflore was very busy preparing the mold for a small casting, but he sat down, rubbed a plaster-covered hand around the top of his head, and said, "Well, well. I did hope to finish this bit today. But call me a conveyance, Mrs. Stane."

"No, Doctor — please! Why can't she get somebody else for her crazy ailments?"

"Well," Dr. Meliflore was doubtful. "She could, I suppose. But she won't. So there's no use talking about it."

"She would if she had to."

"No, I don't think so."

"But why not, Doctor? Why not?"

The doctor paid no attention to the question. Starting to his bedroom, he muttered, "The miserable creature! The silly, silly creature. . . ."

A taxicab set him down at Miss Latterly's house. It was a narrow building with a dirty stone façade. Dr. Meliflore mounted the steps and entered without knocking; he knew the door would have been left unlatched for him. In the hallway he was met by a large black cat whose name was Higgins. Higgins led the doctor up the stairs and into a dimly lit, very warm chamber where Miss Latterly lay in bed, clad as usual in a black robe and pointed nightcap.

Ignoring Higgins and whatever it was that seemed to be swooping through the air, Dr. Meliflore said, "Well, what is it this time?" and without waiting for an answer, sat down beside the bed, took Miss Latterly's wrist to feel for her pulse, and pushed a thermometer into her mouth.

Mrs. Stane spent almost two hours at the front window watching for the doctor's return. The last minutes were almost intolerable. It had begun to snow and the footing was treacherous. Suppose he slipped and broke his hip? Suppose Miss Latterly deliberately pushed him! Goats! That woman! Suppose she threw him down the stairs? Mrs. Stane pushed her insignificant nose against the cold window pane and worried. Fog formed on the glass and she wiped it away with her small fat palm. Presently

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a taxi drew up to the curb and Dr. Meliflore lurched out of it. Mrs. Stane was very annoyed with him for having caused her so much anxiety. She went to the door to let him in and pay off the driver.

Dr. Meliflore sat down on the bench in the hall and stuck out his feet. While Mrs. Stane removed his galoshes, she said, "I never should have let you go. I know I never should have let you go. What was the matter with her this time, Doctor?"

"She's dead."

"Oh?" She remembered to add, "The poor woman! What was it?"

"Well," said the doctor, turning his head while Mrs. Stane unwound the woolen scarf from his throat, "toad poisoning, I should think."

"Toad poisoning! Frog legs, you mean, of course."

"Toads."

He stood up and started to the stairs, but at the first step he paused. "Ah — Mrs. Stane."

"Yes, Doctor?"

"You're very careful of yourself, aren't you?"

"Why, I think so, Doctor." His voice had sounded quite concerned.

"No — experiments?"

"No *what*, Doctor?"

He rubbed his hand over his shining pate. His foot was still on the first step. "No, no," he said, "of course not."

There was a loud knock on the front door. It startled both the doctor and Mrs. Stane.

"Who could that be!" said Mrs. Stane.

"If it's Miss Latterly —"

(There was another, more demanding knock.)

"If it's Miss Latterly," Dr. Meliflore repeated, "tell her to go away. I simply will not be disturbed. I have a cathedral to finish."

"But, Doctor!" cried Mrs. Stane. "You said Miss Latterly was dead!"

"Quite true. So I did." (The knocking on the door was louder and more urgent.) "Please open the door, Mrs. Stane."

"Poor dear!" thought Mrs. Stane. "His memory has failed."

She went to the door and opened it. Higgins entered with a kind of stiff, aggressive suspicion, his back and his tail arched almost painfully. Next came Miss Latterly, rather decrepit, supporting herself with the aid of a broom. She ignored Mrs. Stane and glared at the doctor who was two steps up the stairs.

"Doctor," said Miss Latterly, "I must see you at once!"

"I'm sorry," said Dr. Meliflore. "I'm afraid your case is quite hopeless. I've already told you that." Higgins grinned at Dr. Meliflore in a rather

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nasty way, and Dr. Meliflore added: "And I'm afraid Higgins' case is hopeless, too." He started up the stairs, saying over his shoulder, "Now if you'll forgive me? Show them out, Mrs. Stane."

Neither Higgins nor Miss Latterly paid her the least attention. In fact, when Mrs. Stane turned back from the door, both the cat and the old lady were at the head of the stairs, waiting for Dr. Meliflore to complete the last few steps.

Dr. Meliflore paused. "Very well, Miss Latterly," he said, "but you're a silly woman and Higgins is a silly cat. You've both annoyed me for years. When I retired from practice, I thought I'd be rid of you. I've been patient, very patient. Tonight I thought was the end, but I see I was wrong." In a very dignified way Dr. Meliflore rubbed a few flakes of plaster off his forehead. He seemed to be considering. "Miss Latterly," he said, "are you interested in architecture? Let me show you my model of Notre Dame."

He passed them and led the way into his workroom. The door closed after them. After a while Mrs. Stane went to bed. The next morning she opened the door. Dr. Meliflore was dead, with a rather contented smile on his broad face, sitting in front of his final creation which seemed, at last, to be complete. At least the exterior was perfect in every detail. He had long ago modeled the front doors of the cathedral, and now he had put them in place — closed. Then, his work finished, he had lain his head down on the bench so that he seemed to be peering into the dark interior through the rose window. There was no sign of Miss Latterly and her awful cat. They must have left sometime during the night.

After Dr. Meliflore's mortal remains had been removed and the house was quiet again, Mrs. Stane, deeply grieving, stared through the rose window into the cathedral as the doctor had done, as a child peeks into a house of cards.

It was dark inside, the light that filtered through the stained glass was very feeble, yet as Mrs. Stane's vision adjusted to the religious gloom she could dimly make out the altar, the choir loft and perhaps a station of the cross, though she could not be certain. She *was* certain, however, that she did not really see the black-clad figure of a woman with a cat at her heels, trying vainly to break her way out of the solid walls. If there were screams and curses Mrs. Stane heard them not. Certainly not.

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Neither history nor what helps make it, politics, has yet been resolved into an exact science; yet, for many purposes, the curve of the future can be plotted from an analysis of the data of the past. Mr. Royce studies a not impossible future for our country and plausibly extrapolates a certain historical necessity that will be evoked by the rule of the barbarian.

"...Fight in the Hills"

by STEWART ROYCE

THE PLANE was actually below them, and the predatory snarl of its engines brimmed up from the valley, flooding the ramshackle cabin. Of the five who heard it in the untidy kitchen, only three mattered. The farmer and his wife were shadows, to be forgotten at the end of another night's march; the Major and the Professor and the Mountaineer together constituted a command and general staff. Their partisan battalion lay behind and above, in the heavy timber along the ridge. Below them was only a screen of scouts, and — somewhere — the detachment whose return they were awaiting. The plane might be hunting them, or it might be merely hunting. One thing was certain: it was Enemy, and the tarnished National insignia which the Major wore were a guarantee of a quiet but conclusive hanging at the hands of that same Enemy. His staff officers were only less eligible for the same treatment by being less easily identified as the remnants-in-arms of a conquered nation.

Catching the Major's eye, the Mountaineer nodded, his lean hand caressing the stock of his rifle. The others had reached for their weapons at the first far hum of the plane, but the Mountaineer's rifle seemed to be a part of him. He was a tall man, gangling and prematurely bald, who blended with uncanny ease into this high country from which he had sprung. The roar of the plane was louder, but the Major knew that the Mountaineer was assuring him that the men outside were well hidden.

It was the farmer who panicked. Those who aided guerrillas could expect to die with them, and he knew that his excuses would not reach the bombardier of the plane. The forest might be safety — but the Professor was in the doorway before him. The frowsy little partisan officer could have been the most submissive of citizens of the new Popular State, except for

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the long-bladed knife which he held negligently at belt level. The Major had been a small-town doctor before the occupation had made him a general practitioner of another trade, and he wore his much-mended uniform with sober professional correctness. The Professor, however, had never been known to wear anything resembling a uniform. He contended quite reasonably that his friends knew him, and that he was not interested in advertising himself to his enemies.

"If you run out there, you may attract their attention, and their attentions are often fatal," said the Professor, in his high, pedantic voice. "It is expedient that one should die, rather than many."

While the farmer stood as though hypnotized, the Major realized that the Enemy plane had passed their position and was going on. As it rumbled away down the ranges, the farmer settled back in his seat, white-faced and shaken.

The gray-haired Major shook his head, and his deep-set eyes were troubled. He reflected that what his executive officer had done had been necessary, as usual. Also, it was wrong. That again was as usual. The Professor was logical always, but it took more than logic to fight a guerrilla war.

Looking at the empty, dirty plate before him, the Major wondered whether the farmer would offer more food. The Professor had obviously reached a decision on that point, for he drew up a chair and began to roll a cigarette of the wretched tobacco of the region. The radio in the corner was still playing the same familiar folk song, with an odd brassy accompaniment. Almost with surprise, the Major noted that he had only missed a verse or two of the ballad.

The woman crouched beside the stove was humming the song tunelessly. Neither the passage of the plane nor the arrested action in the room had disturbed her attention to the music. The fact that the recording was off-key, and an obvious Enemy propaganda device, seemed to be lost on her. An absent little smile played over her face, and the Major saw that she must have been pretty once. When she saw him looking at her, she smiled brightly, and hummed louder. The Professor cursed under his breath, and the farmer moved hastily toward his wife.

"She don't know the difference, Friends — sirs, I mean. 'Twere the favorite song of our oldest boy. She still thinks the boys'll be home to help with the haying. She don't know we los — I mean, she don't know the war's still going on. 'Tis a long war, and maybe she's better off'n we are." The man's attitude was a mixture of apology and defiance.

Without warning the woman began to weep quietly into her apron. The farmer turned away helplessly, and it was the Mountaineer who comforted her. He spoke in the local dialect, full of archaic constructions and obsolete

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words, and the Major could scarcely follow the whisper. After a moment, he rose and pushed open the sagging door of the cabin. The plane was almost out of sight, and the Major stood in the doorway until it was gone.

Beyond the ragged corn patch, he could see the mountains rolling away in endless majesty, smoky in the late summer sunlight. Automatically he swept them with his eye, selecting the route that the battalion would travel that night. He sought instinctively for signs of the Enemy, although he knew that they avoided the high slopes and the peaks. Above the subdued valleys, there stretched a free Nation still, with boundaries extending a rifle shot from the edge of the forest. Like the old doctrine of territorial waters, he thought. Must have the Professor put that idea in his book. It occurred to the Major, and not for the first time, that when the Professor stopped talking about that book, it would probably be necessary to do something definite about him. The little pistol at the Major's belt dragged slightly as he tried to recall the last time the unpublished work had been mentioned.

A bird called from the nearby timber, sounding clearly over the tinny Enemy record. Before the Major could interpret the call, the Mountaineer was at his side, gun in hand. The oily snick of the rifle bolt shooting home coincided with a second whistle from the trees, a different note this time.

The gaunt hillman shrugged and lowered his telescope-sighted weapon. Carefully he eased back the bolt, extracted the cartridge, and replaced it in the magazine. "It's all right, Major. Most likely the Braves, with their new War Chief." The Mountaineer's tone was a delicate blend of amusement and contempt.

Inside the farmhouse, the music suddenly ceased. "The Banditry Suppression Service continued its successful operations in the Second Military District yesterday," a harsh voice squawked from the cheap set. "Supported by units of the Popular Army, and assisted at every point by the loyal populace of the region, the Servicemen occupied 28 inhabited localities, taking many prisoners and inflicting heavy casualties on the fleeing bandits." As the Major re-entered the cabin, the farmer shuffled toward the radio. A negative gesture halted his outstretched dirty hand before the program could be cut off.

"Freedom of information, hey?" The jeer was from the Professor. The Major wondered wearily if the man had ever really taught anywhere. He tried to visualize him lecturing to a group of students at some prewar girls' college. "Women are highly valuable in the conduct of partisan operations: as intelligence agents, as couriers, as decoys and as executioners of individuals who are inaccessible through other means. When used for the two latter purposes, however, they are to be classed as expendable, since

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their identification by the Enemy is rapid." As the Major pursued the bizarre thought, he realized that the radio was clamoring on with statistics, claims and predictions of final victory. A new note in the speaker's voice caught at his attention.

"Self-styled 'patriots' in other areas of the Nation will do well to take warning from these victories of the forces of progress. The Government's generous amnesty offer is still valid, in all departments and territories where full-scale pacification offensives have not yet begun. Your time is running short! Come in voluntarily, alone or in groups. You will be allowed to keep your weapons, and will be resettled on good land, with your families. If you feel that you have a duty to the society which you have so foolishly opposed, enlistment in the Banditry Suppression Service is still open. The pay rate is excellent, and you will serve under your own. . . ."

A deafening rivet-hammer burst of fire came from the open doorway. The muzzle blast of the weapon slapped at the Major's face. Some cold, clear portion of his mind identified the gunfire as Enemy, and he had hardly hit the floor before his pistol was out. He nearly fired before he recognized the grinning face and the red hair that showed under the Enemy helmet.

"I sure showed him where to get off, didn't I, boss?" The Major saw that the shots had torn into the radio, leaving it shattered and silent. Swaggering into the room, the new arrival pushed the wreckage to the floor with the smoking barrel of the submachine gun he carried.

"You did, indeed," agreed the Major softly. "Incidentally, you very nearly punched your ticket to Hell. Where did you get all that equipment? We almost shot you."

"Thought I was a Poppo-soldier, huh, with my fancy tin derby and my new typewriter? We all got 'em, boss. Funniest thing you ever saw. Boy, if we had been, were you sitting ducks!" The red-haired youth dissolved in laughter, gesturing wordlessly at his followers, who were outfitted in the latest Enemy style. A cold voice interrupted his mirth.

"If you'd been Enemy, you'd be down yonder in the brushwood, with the buzzards a-looking you over. You been covered for half a mile. Report to the Major like you should, son, and stop being more of a fool than your pappy made you." The Mountaineer sat negligently, but the muzzle of his rifle peered at the men crowding the cabin door. The Major smiled to himself.

"One of the outposts sighted you as you came in, but fortunately you were recognized in time. Now you can relax, sit down, and tell me where you got those guns." The farmer was too frightened to stir from his corner, but his wife arose and began to fill the unwashed plates. Her aimless smile

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had been restored by the Mountaineer, and the flying bullets had not affected her in the least.

The story came from the youth in disjointed phrases, as he wolfed the stew that had been set before him. "They were all drunk, lying around dead to the world. They'd found a guy who makes booze, and had themselves a time. We cut their throats, all but one. They'd tied the old guy up and poured booze down him until he passed out — really passed out. Died. He was a nice old guy, too," Redhead added defensively.

"How many?" asked the Major. He did not inquire how the assault group came to be acquainted with the operator of a still. There are some things a partisan commander does well to disregard.

"Nine. We left the tenth one alive, so he could wake up and find the others. It's an Ay-rab trick a guy told me about once. Funny, huh?"

"Oh, very," the Professor said caustically. "It will be even funnier, of course, when that tenth one picks you off some fine morning. Well, children must play, I suppose. Now go and sleep it off, and pick a spot where the dashing aviator friends of Number Ten can't see you. A couple have been around already, and there'll be more. We move tonight."

"Where to? Why don't we just stay here?"

"In guerrilla country, people who sleep too long in one place are apt to have their throats cut. That goes for the guerrillas, too. In any case, the Major and I will do the thinking. Just stay out of sight, and don't disturb us by snoring."

"Ah, shut up, Prof," said Redhead agreeably. "One day I'll bust your glasses, and then you'll be in a helluva situation." He lit a cigarette and tossed the pack on the table with a large gesture. "Compliments of the Poppos. Help yourselves." He sauntered out, his men straggling after him.

"A quaint and lovable little urchin," sneered the Professor, through a wreath of smoke from one of the Enemy cigarettes. "A worthy citizen-soldier of that free Nation for which we fight."

"He's what the Enemy has made him," said the Major deprecatingly. "He's never known anything else."

"Exactly." The Professor spread his hands as though his point was made. "This war is getting old, Major. It's running down like a clock that somebody forgot to wind. You and I were patriots driven to banditry; the new crop are bandits who pretend to be patriots."

"You're not suggesting that we conduct a partisan campaign by the Rules of Land Warfare? You, of all people!" The Major was trying to turn the conversation to the Professor's favorite subject, himself, but the little man would not be diverted.

"No." The Professor spoke slowly, distinctly. "What I am suggesting

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is that we cease to conduct it." It was out then, and the words ticked in the silence like a loaded bomb.

"You mean the amnesty offer?" The Major waved casually toward the broken radio. "Better save it for Red when he wakes up. I thought you intended to, anyway."

"Why should I waste my breath? He'll go on forever, just as you will. He understands nothing; you understand everything. I?" the Professor shrugged. "I understand just enough to know it's time for me to save my skin. When I mention it aloud, it's only to convince myself. I wouldn't willingly seduce a single one of our bandits from his patriotic duty, Major, but I'm surprised you don't have me shot anyway. Thinking out loud in the wrong places is going to be the death of me yet." The tone was mocking, but the Major wondered how far the man had gone in reading his thoughts.

"Don't talk nonsense," said the Major, forcing a smile. "I need a good executive officer." As he said the words, he wondered if this were not the end of the long mental duel, which he had always conducted with skill and circumspection, in order that the real fight might be kept up. Feeling too tired to face the implications of his lost fight, he turned to the Mountaineer.

"Have you talked this amnesty thing over with your men?"

"None of us think too much of it, Major. We've heard the Prof talk, but he don't believe what he says himself, so far as I kin tell."

"Hear, hear!" said the Professor. "Never has the soul of an intellectual been so neatly dissected. You spoke of executive officers, Major. Well, there's your man. He'll make an excellent replacement for me, or else you can rearrange the table of organization of this so-independent unit. Why, by next spring you'll hardly even remember me!"

"Don't know as I want your job, Professor, not even with a promotion, but you kind of sound as if you meant it. How do you aim to get away with settling down?" The Mountaineer appeared to be drowsing, but his right hand was gently stroking his rifle again.

"I'll head north for long enough to leave this area, where I have — let us be modest — a certain reputation. Then I'll pick up a set of false papers and give up all this mountain climbing."

"How about that amnesty farm, Prof? It'd be joy to me to think of you farming." The Mountaineer was smiling, and the Major saw that the hillman had fallen in with the Major's own line of argument. Can't talk him out of it, so try laughing him out. And if that doesn't work — there the Major stopped thinking.

"Amnesty benefits? Hell, no! Don't let any of the boys do that. If you want to know why I didn't talk to Red about it, I'll tell you. His benefits, like mine, would consist of a bullet in the back of the neck, after a suitable

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interval. We would have time to tell everyone how wonderful it was in the new society, and then we would be fatally murdered to death. It would be those dreadful bandits, of course. I'm leaving, gentlemen, but make no mistake. I plan retirement, not suicide."

"When you fixing to — quit, Captain?" The Mountaineer's last two words were slightly emphasized, like the lazy flick of a whip. Wrong, wrong, the Major thought.

"Right now." The Professor got to his feet. "I brought everything I needed when we came down this morning. My equipment I will to the cause. I shall be on my way now — with the Major's permission, of course." For an instant the Major had a curiously unreal feeling, as though the Professor's departure, and all that it implied, was something he had read of long ago. The Mountaineer's voice brought him back to the room, and to the knowledge that if the incident seemed familiar, it was only because he had subconsciously foreseen it for so long.

"I'll take him down through the outpost line, Major, see him through safe, if that's all right with you." The Mountaineer arose, cradling his rifle. Ordinarily the Major would not have noticed the careless gesture, but this time it took on a special meaning. The Major shook his head.

"I'll go with him, to say goodbye." The Professor stood aside at the doorway, and the Major led the way across the field. The little pistol was dragging heavily at his belt, but there were some things a commander could not delegate — not and retain command.

It was cool under the trees, the underbrush almost masking the path. The Major saw no one, but he knew that the Mountaineer's riflemen were scattered through the area. Maybe some were watching them as they walked, knowing nothing of what was about to happen. It would have to be further on. The Professor had taken the lead now, and the Major spoke to his back.

"If you leave us, that's one less. What about the Nation after you've gone? You're an authority on guerrilla history: maybe you recall the people whose watchword was that men die fighting, but that a country dies only when it surrenders." It was probably useless to attack the Professor on his own ground, but the Major had to try every alternative, before the last one.

"I know that people, and they won. The difference was that they were supplied by one big state, and eventually liberated by another. What we lack, Major, is hope. Listen and you'll hear another plane. Never mind looking: it isn't one of ours. There aren't any more of ours. There never will be, and we both know it. They're hunting us, but this country is so big that they'll look forever. You and I and all the rest of us can live out our lives

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in peace. I'm not choosing it as the glorious course. Merely the practical one."

"And the generations that come after?" the Major asked.

"Let them look to themselves. I haven't contributed to their number, nor do I intend to. Tyrannies have come and gone before. This one will go in time, with or without my valuable opposition."

"No," the Major contradicted him, suddenly sure of himself, even in the knowledge that he had lost the other man. "There must always be opposition. If we stop, men will forget that there was such a thing as freedom. Before, there was always freedom outside, the free barbarians beyond the Wall, beyond the river, beyond the seas. When tyranny decayed, they moved in. Now there's nobody but us. The Enemy thought he had passed the crossroads of history, when his armies swept the world and he occupied the Nation. The truth is that we, not they, are at the crossroads. It's a new historical role."

"So we're the new barbarians, are we? Within, not outside the Empire? An interesting thought. I must include it in my book." The Professor had stopped, swung on his heel and come back. "That would mean we would have to remain in being, like Mahan's fleets, for years, perhaps even for generations, in order to profit by the softening that comes with supremacy. That's what Toynbee must have meant when he talked about the dry rot of the Universal State. He never saw a universal state, the lucky man, but the principle is still the same." There was an intent look on the Professor's face, and the Major could almost hear the new chapter headings being roughed out. For a moment he thought he had won, but suddenly the little man seemed to shrink within his tattered civilian jacket.

"Too long, too long," he muttered to himself. "Good luck, Major. If I believed in anything, I'd pray for you. Since I don't, I'll just hope that the forces of history go with you." The Professor turned, took two strides and stopped, seeming to square his shoulders and take a deep breath. After an instant, he walked on without looking back.

The Major never knew how long he stood there, staring at the spot where the Professor's back had been. He was unconscious of the weight of the pistol now, but he knew that if he had drawn it and fired when the Professor stopped, the pistol would never have been light again. The Professor would have known it was reasonable — had known it — but there came a time when reason was not enough. With a start, the Major realized that the Mountaineer was at his side, rifle slung.

"We kin go back now, Major. Could be it's best so. He was a smart little man, and a tough one. Maybe he wouldn't talk, even if they caught him, and it's an ill thing to kill your own, when there's so many Enemy left."

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The Mountaineer's voice was almost a whisper, but it carried clearly over his noiseless stride as he led the way up the slope again.

"I heard what you told him at the last, Major. Is it true? I tell the boys we'd better die on our feet than live on our knees, but seeing the Prof go off is going to make them wonder. He was an educated man, and folks set store by education."

"It's got to be true. That's our faith, yours and mine. When they grow fat on the loot of the Nation, of the whole world, the peoples they've enslaved will rise and destroy them. There must be someone ready to lead the destruction, and the rebuilding after." The Major felt an urgent need to communicate his faith, which had for the first time been formed into words. "It may not be in our time, but while we hold out there'll be a place for people who remember freedom."

"That's enough, I guess. I've got sons, and their sons and theirs will forget how we lost them freedom in remembering how we gave it them back." The Major could not see, but he was certain that the Mountaineer was stroking his rifle as he strode on.

The running feet behind them were so quick that even the Mountaineer could not turn in time. The Professor was winded, but he still had enough breath left for a short laugh.

"Company for tea, Major. They must have trailed Red. He left enough markers even for them to spot."

The Mountaineer understood instantly. Simultaneously he unslung his rifle and whistled a soft note. "How many? How far?"

"About a dozen I saw, but there's more behind. They're just hitting the steep slope, and they're moving slow. About ten minutes." Men were around them now, and the Major issued his orders rapidly. As they dog-trotted back toward the cabin, the Professor fell in with the rest. The question was out before the Major could stop it.

"Still with us?"

"Call it a new research project. Supplement to my book."

They halted at the edge of the clearing, and the Professor caught his breath with difficulty. "I'd like to withdraw my resignation. Make it an application for six months' leave. I'll hole up somewhere in the hills, and write my book. Pick me up in the spring. I'll give you a copy of the first edition, suitably inscribed. Treatise on the theory and practice of partisan warfare. It'll have a selective — oh, highly selective — circulation, in the new Popular State."

Before the Major could answer, there was a roar as a plane swept low overhead. "Are all your men in, Sergeant Cottrill?" he said to the Mountaineer, without haste. "Tell them to rejoin the battalion, and to keep under

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cover. They haven't spotted us yet." He turned quickly as he heard the Professor's mocking laugh, saw him point toward the cabin.

Across the farmyard, in full view from overhead, stumbled the red-haired youth, rubbing sleep from his eyes and staring at the plane.

"Stand still, lieutenant, and don't look up!" roared the Major. Even as he shouted, he knew it was too late. The plane was coming back, not on a strafing run as the Major fully expected, but in steady, level flight. He knew then what was coming, even before the first parachutes blossomed.

"The new issue of heroes must be fragile." It was the Professor, his eyes following the dropping chutes. "They don't like to drop in trees, even to cut off a bunch of bandits. Well, we mustn't seem inhospitable. I suggest that Lieutenant Nelson stay to receive our visitors. After all, he invited them."

"Tell him we'll cover him from the ridge, with one section," said the Major rapidly. "And tell him for me that I'll reduce him one grade for every man he loses in disengaging. Then rejoin the battalion yourself, and take over until I show up. I've got to get the farmer and his wife out with me, if they'll come. There'll be time."

The Enemy Paratroopers were falling too far down the mountainside, as the Professor had said. It had been foolish enough to send out planes when they had a clear trail to follow, but even so they could have trapped their quarry by jumping into the high timber and taking a few losses.

Rifles were beginning to crack from the forest. That would be Cottrill's sharpshooters, mountainy men like Cottrill himself, who could hit a turkey gobbler — or a red star — as far as they could see it.

The Major had stepped out into the open, secure in the knowledge that the battalion's mission would eventually be fulfilled, when he heard the urgent voice of the Professor at his elbow.

"Let me get those fool civilians, my gun's at the cabin anyway. You take the battalion. To test your theory — no, our theory — armed resistance has got to be kept up, and you're the man to do it, for the long pull.

"Don't worry, I won't wander off again," the little man added with a wry smile. "After all, I could have slipped around them down below, before I came back. You see, I have a research project to conduct on your democratic barbarians, and where better could I do it than with the 332nd Independent Battalion, U.S. Militia? Besides, if you're going to make history, you'll need a historian. Go on, Major Hendricks, go on!"

"Move out, then, on the double!" For a second, the Major stood watching the small, running figure. "And don't get yourself killed, Professor!" he shouted over the rising clamor of battle. "The people of the United States of America ought to read that book!"

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From Homer to Haggard, from the dim time when tales were told from memory around cave fires down to the present era with its flood tide of science-fantasy magazines, the theme of the Hero has been one of the most popular in imaginative literature. Call the roll yourself: Achilles, Rama, Sigurd, Rustum, El Cid Campeador, Roland and Oliver, Paul Bunyan, Umslopogaas . . . these are but a few of that great host whose legendary might has enriched the prose and poetry of every nation this earth has known. With rare insight chroniclers, both known and nameless, have recorded that each and every Hero paid for his might and glory with a lonely life and tragic death. Even the luck of an Irish Hero had its ending, as witness the brief life of Ulster's darling, Coo-Cullen, that "small, dark sad man" who lived long, long ago when "the English were still swinging from tree to tree" but "the Irish were all so civilized as to be using propaganda and poison."

The Hound of Cullen

by W. B. READY

I

A BOY THERE was in old Ireland, whose mother called him Salty. Nobody ever calls him Salty now, because the Irish people gave him another name, and it was under the new name that the boy became Ireland's pride, and England's envy, and the delight of the whole wide world. Salty's new name was Coo-Cullen, and in getting that name the young lad came to glory and to an early green grave in Ireland.

It happened a long time ago, before America, when Ireland was the Western World. To look at him nobody would ever have given Salty a second glance. He was a small dark lad. He had a gentle way with him, and his eyes were sad and blue. Although he was only a little fellow, his mother loved him dearly; for he was all she had after the boy's father was killed in some local trouble. There was always some trouble in Ireland in those days. They lived in Ulster, which is the north of Ireland, and the men of Ulster were always fighting against the men of the west of Ireland, or against the men

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of the south of Ireland, or against the men of Scotland, who were some sort of cousins of theirs. There was always a fight going on somewhere, and while it's fun to read about fighting, and while the men were always itching after it, it's a sad and bitter thing for the mothers and the children. So Salty's mother brought him up in a quiet place, and like all mothers she prayed that her little boy would never have to go to the wars. Besides, Salty was such a little fellow.

As Salty grew into boyhood he began to see that his mother was keeping something from him. He loved his mother, but he was restless in that quiet place, and at last he went to her.

"Mother, why are there no other boys here for me to play with?"

His mother looked at him sadly for a while and then she said:

"They are living at the King's House, Salty."

Salty looked at her straight, and because he knew it would pain her he said no more, but the next morning he went to her with his stick and his ball and told her that he was going to the King's House, to see what the boys were doing. His mother nodded slowly and did not try to stop him. She just pointed to the west, where the King's House lay, then turned away so that Salty would not see her weeping.

Salty faced the west, threw the ball in the air, and hit it with his stick. As it soared westward through the clear air he ran after it, and so fleet was he that he always caught it before it reached the ground. All day long he traveled that way, and as the quiet of Christ was coming over Ulster with the gentle fall of evening he came to the fields around the King's House.

There was a crowd of boys playing in the fields. The game they were playing was a sort of hockey, and Salty watched them for a minute and then ran in to join them. Before any of them could stop him he guided the ball with his stick and scored a goal. When the boys saw that he was a stranger they crowded around him, and Salty could feel in the air their dislike of him. They were all big redheaded boys, whose fathers had become the bosses in Ulster, while Salty, small and dark, was evidently just a poor native boy.

The leader of the redheads looked Salty over silently. None of the others said anything; they just kept shuffling around Salty, who was scared inside, but didn't show it. He just stared back at the crowding gang.

"Who are you?" said the gang leader at last, slowly, and with menace.

"My name is Salty," he said. "I've never had friends to play with, so I came to join you. But I can see that you don't want me, so I'll be on my way." Salty tried to push his way through the crowd of them, carrying his stick and his ball with him, because he didn't want any trouble. All his life he never was to go looking for trouble. It always was to make him feel sick and trembly when it started.

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"Just a minute, Darky, just a minute," said the gang leader easily. "Did you think you were going to get away with it like that? We're going to teach you little local boys not to come around bothering us." Then, before Salty could put his hands up, all the gang started to hit him on his shoulders and his arms with their sticks.

Salty ran a little way to get clear of them, and this, of course, made the gang bolder. It always makes a gang bolder when they see that their victim is a weak one, so they ran after him, howling and jostling one another to get a crack at the gossoon. They would have killed him in their excitement, and that would have been all right, because Salty was just a native of the place. The poor deluded redheads began to enjoy themselves, when, all of a sudden, Salty turned and faced them. Even then, in his first fight, all new to the game, Salty somehow knew where to fight. He stopped to face them on a wee hillock, that gave him an advantage in height, and behind him was a rock, so that they couldn't sneak around the back of him.

If the gang hadn't been so excited and confident they would have seen something in Salty that would have made them want to talk things over. The small diffident shy boy had suddenly become a squat, crouched, and hunched little fighter, who held his stick as if it was part of him. Salty's nostrils had flared out, and his pallor had become dead white. Something seemed to come out of him, a sort of power, as it still does, out of all great fighters.

As the first redhead reached him, Salty gave a wordless scream and he hit his tormentor so hard that the boy went down. A joy entered into Salty, and he struck and thrust at his enemies until they all realized that they were in the hands of a master fighting man. They broke and ran, those that were left standing, and with a whoop of sheer joy Salty ran after them. For sanctuary they sought the King's House, and they dashed past the astounded King Connor, upsetting the game of chess that he was enjoying with one of his advisers. Before the King had time to say anything Salty was in the hall after them. He chased his loutish tormentors all around the hall, while they wept and howled for mercy. Only when his anger was satisfied did Salty notice the King, who was staring at him open-mouthed.

Salty leaned upon his stick and bowed like an actor, as his mother had taught him.

"It is King Connor, isn't it?" he asked politely, above the sobbing and the howling and the groaning. Salty aways had a dignified way with him. "Who are you? What's your name? Where are you from? What have you done?" The questions poured out of the King.

"My name is Salty. My father was a soldier, now dead. I come from Enniskillen to join the boys at your house, but they beat me up until I

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got angry. I'm sorry if I have disturbed you. I'll be on my way now," said Salty. "I had hoped to stay."

The King had no intention of letting Salty go. He was a great warrior himself, and he saw the greatness that lay in Salty. "Let you be staying, dark lad. You have to be recommended to live in my house, but I'll recommend you myself. You'll stay here as Protector of the King's Boys, and one day you will lead them as my Household Brigade."

Salty smiled at the King, and the King smiled back. The gang had all crept away during this, and Salty bowed again to King Connor and went to the Boys' House, where he sat at the head of the table as by right. Within a few days all the redheads were his followers, and Salty was on his way to gaining his name of Coo-Cullen.

A local man named Cullen invited King Connor and a few of his friends to dinner one night. Cullen lived in a castle about ten miles from the King's House, and when the King was ready to start he shouted for Salty to come with him. Salty was in the middle of a game at the time, so he told the King to start without him, and that he would get there later. So the King and his friends drove off in their chariots, and Salty, about half an hour later, ran after them on foot. It was dark before he got to Cullen's castle, and he was still about a mile away when the assembled company was having a drink before their meal. The King didn't mention that Salty was coming, he didn't think of it; so Cullen locked the door of the castle and set his watchdog loose.

This animal was one of the wonders of Ireland. It wasn't a dog at all, but a black panther that some sailors had brought to Cullen out of Africa while it was still a helpless baby. Cullen had trained it to prowl around the castle at night and to go back to its cage in the morning. It kept the wolves away from the flocks and the cattle, and only killed them itself when it was hungry, which Cullen thought was fair enough. The one great snag about the thing was that once the creature was loose it was impossible to get in or out of the castle until it went back to its lair, and was locked in, in the morning. The Irish word for hound was *Coo*, and that was what the panther was called — Coo-Cullen, or Cullen's hound.

Suddenly, while the company was drinking, a bloodcurdling snarl went up from the panther, and King Connor went pale at the sound of it, for he suddenly remembered Salty, and he on his way to the castle. The whole company grew silent at the snarling, which suddenly bayed into the shrieks that a panther makes before the kill. Salty was almost on top of the long and sinewy beast before he realized his danger. Almost without thinking he threw the pebble that he had been balancing in his hand so that it whizzed past the panther. The animal deflected its gaze a moment to look at it, and

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at that very moment Salty leaped to the side of the panther, and grabbing it by the scruff of the neck and by a hind leg he swung it up and around and dashed it against the castle wall. The panther snarled and spat and writhed like a mad thing, but Salty was inexorable. He killed the panther by repeated dashings, the whole two hundred pounds of panther, and when Cullen and King Connor, with torchbearers and many spears, dashed out to recover the lacerated body of Salty before the panther could drag it away, they found the small dark lad looking down at the broken, still twitching body of Cullen's hound.

It was from that time that Salty began to be regarded as different from all other men, as indeed he was. The King looked at him strangely for a while, and pityingly. Then he put his arm around Salty and led him into the castle.

Cullen, a decent stupid man, was inconsolable about the death of his panther. He knew that his flocks and herds would now be ravaged by the wolves, and that all the robbers of the area would endanger him now that his protection was gone, for trusting in his panther Cullen had no guards to protect him. He looked so glum, although relieved at Salty's safety, that Salty, touched with pity for him, said, "Cullen, send to Africa for another such a creature. Until he gets here and is trained, I, Salty, will be your watchdog."

So it was. For over a year, until the new panther was ready, Salty prowled the castle grounds every night. He kept away the beasts of prey and the robbers, who, after their first attempt against him, would have sooner gone against an army with banners than against that small, dark sad man. That was how Salty got the name of Coo-Cullen. He was the hound of Cullen. He was that man's protection as he was later to be the champion of all the people of Ireland, before his brief life was spent.

II

It was a year and more before Cullen got hold of a new panther, and all that time Salty was his watchdog. He was never to be a big man, but the time he was at Cullen's made him strong and bold and hardy. After the wolves had come down on the flocks several times, Salty got so that he could run after them and catch them. All the little children and the peaceful people slept quietly in their beds every night because they knew that Coo-Cullen would keep harm from them; and bad men paled when they even heard his name. Cullen was sorry to see him go, and wanted him to stay and live with him, but the small dark boy had to press on toward his end.

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When he went back to King Connor he took on where he had left off, but he found no joy in it. The boys of the King's House at once hailed him as their leader again, but Coo-Cullen felt that he was just marking time there. He knew that he was on the eve of great events that would change him, and so it happened.

King Connor used to ask any famous men who were passing through his country to come and talk to the boys, so that they would not grow up ignorant. And one day in the spring a famous wise man from the ancient land of Wales arrived to tell them about the future. The Welshman was very old, with a long white beard, and he had seen so much of the past that it was easy for him to tell what was going to happen ahead. He had a high singsong voice. When he was talking he didn't seem to be looking at anything, but his burning bright eyes, under their bushy white brows, seemed to be staring inward at what really mattered, under the surface of things.

"This day," said he, "a hero will arise in some land. Today he will take up arms for the first time, and he will start on his road to glory. His life will be a brief and bitter one, but the generations who come after him will always remember him." With that he looked straight at Coo-Cullen, for Salty was always called that now; and without a word Salty got up and went to King Connor.

Without even a salutation the dark lad said: "King, I no longer am a boy, but today I must take up arms as a man." King Connor looked at him sadly, for he loved the boy more than he did his own flesh and blood.

"Must you so, Coo-Cullen? Must you so? Ah well, neither myself nor any other man can stop you. Is it the wise man from Wales who has been talking to you, and telling you this?"

Unsmiling Coo-Cullen said: "It is so." With a sigh the King shouted for his armor sergeant to come and equip the swank young lad with all the trappings of a warrior.

The soldiers of Erin were not like the knights in armor who came along later. They used to wear a kilt of saffron color, a cloak, and shoes like moccasins. Their weapons were a big broad sword that was called a claymore, a throwing spear, and a slingshot. To protect themselves they carried a round shield covered with thick cowhide and studded with nails. They didn't ride on horses, but used to drive a span of them harnessed to a chariot, that was an open low-slung light cart, and long knives used to project out from it, to cut enemies down if they tried to stop them driving through.

The armor sergeant brought out some good weapons for Coo-Cullen to try. Very seriously and earnestly Coo-Cullen tried them all, and none of them were good enough for him. He had to have the best, he knew. He simply could not afford to take chances on faulty weapons any more than

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a soldier or a farmer today can take chances with the tools of his trade. Coo-Cullen was so strong that the swords and the spears broke in his hands, as he tried them out quietly but furiously. The span of horses in the chariot could not keep up the furious pace that he set, and the cart itself came to pieces as he stamped up and down. The armor sergeant was in despair, until King Connor ordered out his own personal equipment. He knew that he would never be needing it anyhow as long as Coo-Cullen lived. The King's weapons and his horses and his chariot were the best that had ever been made up to that time, and they stood up to Coo-Cullen's testing. At last he was satisfied with his arms and equipment. Standing up in the chariot the boy pulled the horses up so that they reared, and, saluting the King, Coo-Cullen drove off to the borders of Ulster to look for glory. He went so fast that it looked as if a cloud of dust was traveling, and not a small dark sad lad driving furiously to look for immortality. Old-timers standing about swore that they could see a kind of glowing radiance all around the charioteer as he raced southward, out of Ulster. Be that as it may it is told as a fact that the speed of his passing raised a wind that tore washing off the lines and loosened shingles in the roofs.

Coo-Cullen didn't stop until he got to the border, where he pulled up the lathering horses to talk to one of the champions of Ulster. In those days, all along the border, where there was a pass between the mountains of Mourne, King Connor had placed his special men. If a man wanted to enter Ulster as a friend, why that was fine and dandy, but if he came looking for trouble, why, the champions would take him on with no holds barred. Yet these champions were never bully boys. They were always gentle with the weak and the poor and with women and children, and if a traveling Irishman didn't feel in the mood for fighting they were glad to send him on his way in peace, or to sit and drink with him until he felt natural again.

This particular champion was very fond of Coo-Cullen and he warned him not to go out of Ulster that night, as three bad men were hiding in the hills nearby, and they were very hard hombres indeed, but at that Coo-Cullen's eyes lighted up so that they seemed to be sparking, and without a word he set his horses galloping toward the hills that were already becoming blue in the evening light.

Coo-Cullen had never fought with real men before. Until now he had been an apprentice. Now he wanted to see how well he had learned his trade. His chariot swooped up the mountain toward the glow of a campfire, outside a cave, which he knew must be the hide-out of the bandits. As he drew up with a swirl that almost set the horses back on their buttocks, one of the bandits came out of the cave and stood looking at him. Behind him his two brothers crowded. They laughed when they saw the small dark man

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step down from his chariot and start walking toward them, his hands hanging loose, his sword by his side, and his spear and his shield on his back. Coo-Cullen walked very lightly, like a cat, like all fighting creatures, and he was obviously looking for trouble, and the bandits thought that they were the boys who could give it to him.

In those days, before men tangled with one another, they always told the world who they were if there was time, and by the light of the fire that evening it seemed as if there were plenty of time.

Coo-Cullen stopped a few paces from the fire, on the other side from the bandits, and thumping his chest with a thud he said: "I am Coo-Cullen, a champion man out of Ulster." Then he stayed quiet, very quiet, watching and waiting, in the flickering firelight. Night had come on by this time, and outside the circle of firelight all was dark and still. The hills around were watchful, everlasting, and waiting. The birds had lifted their heads from beneath their wings and were waiting too, but never broke the silence. The deer looked up from their couches in the heather, and the solitary wildcat, crouched on a jutting rock, gazed unblinking at the small dark man making his brag.

The first bandit stepped forward and he thumped his chest. "I am Brian Boy McGee and my father was Owen Downy, and I care nothing for all the men of Ulster. My father, God rest him, used to eat three Ulstermen before his breakfast on a quiet morning."

With that he struck at Coo-Cullen with a razor-sharp sword that he had craftily concealed behind his back, but with a gasp saw that Coo-Cullen was no longer there. The lithe dark hero had leaped aside as the blade descended, and the blanket of the dark had covered him. Brian Boy looked around wildly for his enemy when with an awful whistle a slingshot came whizzing in from the black night, and it stretched him senseless on the ground.

The second brother stepped over the still body of the first and made his brag, and his voice sounded raucous in the still night air. "I am Red Marty McGee," said he, "and my brother is Brian Boy. He was betrayed by the wiles of a crafty black Ulsterman."

Coo-Cullen was not to be seen. He had become a part of the dark night. Then suddenly a splash of water landed on the fire, and in the smoke and sparks that came up, while Red Marty was spluttering, Coo-Cullen leaped at him and beat him thrice over the head with the flat of his sword, and the second bandit joined his brother in sleeping.

The third and last of the bandits stepped forward warily over the quiet bodies of his two brothers and he beat his chest and bragged: "I am Rory of the Battles, and no small dark man can beat me." But the poor fellow said

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it without spirit, and he even bowed his head so that Coo-Cullen could reach up to smite him, for he was a fine tall redheaded man, and until that night he had had a great opinion of himself. Then when the three of them lay empty of harm Coo-Cullen tended his horses and gave them grass and water. The creatures of the wild ceased their watching, and the night took over while Coo-Cullen stamped out the fire, woke up the three sore-headed bandits, and tied them behind his chariot. As he drove back through the gloom of middle night he remembered his deeds, and his heart was high with them, and a great feeling of peace came over Coo-Cullen.

He drove slowly through the darkness, and as dawn was breaking he came again to the country around the household of King Connor. In the early light he saw a noble stag, that was as big as a moose. He couldn't chase it in his chariot, as the bandits were tethered behind, and anyhow the horses were not fast enough to keep up with the fleet-footed stag, so he leaped out and chased it on foot. So fast was Coo-Cullen that he ran past the stag, and turned and tackled it. He jumped upon its back when it got up, and although it bucked and reared like a steer he mastered it, and rode it quietly back to his chariot and harnessed it to the front to help the tired horses.

Just as he did so a flight of black swans passed overhead. Now these were very unusual birds, so Coo-Cullen made a mighty leap into the blue air and caught three of them in his hands. He tied them so that they flew above his chariot, and so he came home to King Connor.

Coo-Cullen in his day had done wonders. Although he was to do far more glorious things in the brief span of life that was left to him, King Connor was always to remember that shining spring morning when the dark, unsmiling lad with the quiet hands hove into sight, all gilded by the rising sun, in his chariot, with the black swans circling over him, the stag stepping out with the horses, and the three bandits plodding along in the rear.

All Ulster knew, then all of Ireland knew, that a hero had arisen in the North. The small, dark sad man, who had been the guardian of Cullen's castle, was to become the guardian of all of Ulster, then of all of Ireland, and, in a way, of all the Western World.

III

In the days when Coo-Cullen was in his pride there was no money at all. If any Irishman in those days had seen a dollar bill he would never have known it. The rich men in those days were the men who had the best cattle or the fastest horses or a singing voice or the wisdom to tell about the future.

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The voice might crack, and the wisdom might fail, and the horses might stumble, so that the wealth that was most desired was cattle, and it was the greedy search for wealth by Maeve the Queen of Ireland that brought Coo-Cullen to his doom.

Ever since he had proved himself, Coo-Cullen had been the champion of King Connor, and he had regarded the King as his own father; while King Connor on his part loved Coo-Cullen more than his own sons. King Connor owned the best bull in Ireland. It was a huge, brown beast of a bull, and it was his pride and joy. So famous was it that Queen Maeve was greedy to get it, and once a bad and wealthy person sets his or her heart on something there is always trouble until it is obtained. There is no joy in such getting, just dirty greed.

Queen Maeve first tried to buy the brown bull legally, but King Connor would not even talk terms. He sent her messengers away rubbing their ears; he had clipped them across the head for the impudence in even asking for the bull. So Queen Maeve turned to trickery in order to get the bull. She didn't want the big, brown brute because she was a cattle fancier; she was just determined that nobody else should have better stock than she.

In order to do her dirty work she sent across to Wales, where some very crafty people lay hiding from the anger of King Connor, who had booted them out of Ulster, because, he said, they were not fit to associate with decent men. One of the villains was a man named Mickey Finn, and he proposed a scheme to Queen Maeve that met with her approval. The scheme was this: to send some drugged liquor to King Connor, all wrapped up in a fancy packet, the liquor to be drugged so strongly that it would put the King and all his warriors to sleep for a whole year, and in their sleeping Queen Maeve could cross the border into Ulster, rustle the bull, and put all Ulster to destruction at the same time.

It was just the sort of dirty trick that appealed to Queen Maeve, and the parcel, all fancy, was prepared and sent to King Connor right away. The label was forged, so that it looked as if it had come from the King of Scotland, who brewed the best liquor in the world in those days; he still does for that matter. Now King Connor, like most Irishmen, God help them, could never say no to a drink, and he and his men had a fine party on the stuff the night the parcel of liquor arrived. All his men passed into the deep sleep with him, except Coo-Cullen, who never touched the stuff. He was away hunting at the time anyway.

Mickey Finn had sneaked into Ulster disguised as a decent man, and as soon as he saw that King Connor and his men had fallen for his trick he sent a swift messenger off to Queen Maeve, who was standing near the borders of Ulster, ready to march in with her army.

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Coo-Cullen returned a few hours after the King and his company had fallen into their slumber. He knew at once that something was the matter when he saw the whole of the host of Ulster all stretched out in the dining hall, fast asleep and fully dressed. Without wasting a moment he jumped into his chariot and rushed to the border just as the sly Queen Maeve was preparing to cross the river that led into Ulster. It was night when Coo-Cullen reached the other side of the river. He left his chariot with his driver, and swam across to where the whole army of Ireland was sleeping, with its sentries thrown out to guard them.

The first thing that Coo-Cullen did was to corral all the sentries and hang them up from a tree, like a line of washing. The poor fellows were so terrified when they realized that they were being handled by the great Coo-Cullen, the Hound of Ulster, that they hung quiet all night, with their eyes bugging out, afraid to whisper even to each other as they swung upside down in the gentle night breeze. Then Coo-Cullen cut down a mighty tree with his sword. He peeled the bark off it so that it looked like a telegraph pole, and he sharpened one end of it, which he stuck into the middle of the swirling river, and on it he pinned a notice saying "Keep Out, Tricky Maeve," and he signed it Coo-Cullen, the Hound of Ulster. That was the first time that Coo-Cullen had ever signed himself the Hound of Ulster, but he knew that night that the whole safety of the women and children of Ulster was his responsibility, so he felt again the way he had felt when he was Cullen's watchdog, only he felt it a thousand times more on this dangerous occasion.

In those days the way through Ireland was all tangled and wooded, so in the morning Queen Maeve sent a party of her engineers to survey the river and to come back and report to her. The wicked woman was in great spirits, because she felt that in no time at all the famous brown bull of Cooley would join her herd, to the sorrow of King Connor.

The morning dawned fine and early, and the engineers soon reached the riverbank after the first light had broken. No sooner had they seen the warning notice on the pole than Coo-Cullen was raging among them, and he had knocked all of them cold before they even had had a chance to know whether it was a thunderbolt or the small dark hero that had struck them. Coo-Cullen could not take any prisoners, as he had no place to put them, nor any men to guard them, with all the Ulster warriors doped by Mickey Finn, so he tied them into a cart and smacked the horses on the rump, having pointed them in the general direction of Queen Maeve's camp.

The slippery woman was standing in the doorway of her tent, eagerly waiting for the return of her engineers, when the driverless wagon clattered past her door with the dazed engineers just beginning to sit up and take

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notice in the body of it. She let out a screech when she saw them that stopped the horses and brought all the camp running to the place. "What's the matter with youse all?" she screamed; she was a very uneducated woman, that same Maeve. "What's the matter with youse all? Are youse all drunk, you dirty engineers?" But the poor men could only chatter and jibber like monkeys, for they had begun to realize that they had been in the hands of the great Coo-Cullen, and had got away with it. At last they could tell the story, how they had seen a huge pole stuck in the river, with a notice on it, but before they had been even able to start reading it something had hit them. The whole camp murmured and shuffled, for none of them had the heart to move against Ulster if Coo-Cullen had escaped the wiles of Mickey Finn.

Queen Maeve's eyes glittered with hate against the small dark man who alone stood between her and the brown bull of Cooley. Her hands writhed like a nest of snakes, and she bit her lips until the blood ran, trying to think of a way of overcoming the single obstacle that lay between her and her greedy desire. She stormed and ranted at her men, and strung up poor Mickey Finn to the nearest tree. Then she sent a troop of cavalry to fight its way to the river, to read the notice and report back to her, but they never came back; they had met Coo-Cullen in his anger, the poor unfortunate fellows. At last the whole army moved ponderously to the river, cautiously and fearfully, and even then Coo-Cullen circled around them like the hound that he was and snapped up any stragglers, who never saw their mothers again.

At last Queen Maeve got to the riverbank and read the notice that was fluttering on the pole. When she read the words "Keep Out, Tricky Maeve," she fell into such an angry fit that she foamed at the mouth and swore that she would never rest until she saw Coo-Cullen dead.

Coo-Cullen watched her tantrums from the branches of a high tree, and he saw her go into conference with her generals. Some of those same generals were decent men, friends of Coo-Cullen in the days before Maeve by her beguiling, because she was a very beautiful, as well as a very bad woman, had subjugated all of Ireland to her will except for the land of Ulster. At the conference she demanded that some of the generals should visit Coo-Cullen and ask him what he wanted, under a flag of truce. She offered to give him all the wealth he wanted; she even promised to spare all of Ulster, just as long as he let her take away the brown bull.

The generals shook their heads. "Queen Maeve," they said, "you will never be able to bribe or to beguile the dark lad. That Coo-Cullen is the cleanest man who ever lived, and he will have to die before he lets you pass into Ulster. There are not enough cattle in the world, nor enough horses,

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to buy the small dark man. He will defend his land of Ulster against hell and high water, against the rest of Ireland, until the dope wears off King Connor and his fighting men." Queen Maeve sneered at them.

"Every man can be bought," she said. "Didn't I buy all of youse bold heroes?" The poor generals shuffled and looked ashamed. "Let you go, Darky, and you, Skin-Horn. You both used to be friends of Coo-Cullen. Tell him that I'll give him anything he wants. I'll even marry him to my daughter, and I'll resign, so that he can be king of Ireland, just so long as I get that brown bull out of Ulster. BUT I'M GOING TO GET THAT BULL!"

Darky and Skin-Horn crossed the river under a flag of truce, and they found Coo-Cullen waiting for them, standing by his chariot. They got a lump in their throat, as they looked at the small dark man standing beside his horses and his driver, so composed and quiet as always. He greeted them with quiet affection, for he knew that soldiers often have to serve under leaders that they never like.

"Coo-Cullen," said Darky, after the salutations were over, "Coo-Cullen, Queen Maeve wants to know what your terms are." Darky never looked at Coo-Cullen while he spoke those words.

"These are my terms," said Coo-Cullen. "Queen Maeve must supply me with food, as I will have no time to prepare it, and I will let her army advance for as far and as long every day as it takes me to beat one of her champions every day. If I am disabled, why, as you know, all Ulster will be at her mercy. If she doesn't agree, I'll harass and kill her army from the bushes while I have life in me, and I'll slaughter the bull of Cooley, so that there will be no point in her going on at all unless she agrees to my terms. I have given this matter great thought," said Coo-Cullen seriously, "and it seems to me the only way that I can hold the wicked Maeve at bay until King Connor and his army awake."

"But Coo! my dear friend," said Skin-Horn impulsively. "Sure, you can't do that! It will be at least a full six months before Mickey Finn's dirty work wears away, and how can you fight all the champions of Ireland, one a day for six months? Why don't you give her the bull, and become king of Ireland?" Coo-Cullen shook his small, dark, sad head.

"No, my dear companions, that cannot be. Let you go back with my message, and I pray that we will never meet in battle, for it would be a drear thing to fall by the hand of one of you."

The generals went back to camp with Coo-Cullen's message. Queen Maeve grinned all over her face when she heard it. Early next morning the army prepared to move across the river while one of her chief bully boys went out to engage Coo-Cullen. Coo-Cullen was still such a young hero that many of the more famous old-time champions were scornful of meeting

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him, and his friends, of course, didn't want to tangle with the small dark man; they still loved life. On the first morning, then, while the Irish army looked on, a bold, young fighting man out of Cork, where many great fighters have always come from, was rowed across the river to meet Coo-Cullen. He stood up before the dark lad, all armed and confident, and began to make his brag, when Coo-Cullen stopped him. "Wait now, Corkman, wait now," said Coo-Cullen courteously. "Have you thought this over, lad? We are fighting for keeps, you know. Let you be going away from here now, or you'll go back over the river feet first." This quiet, conciliatory speech of Coo-Cullen so angered the Cork lad that he made a terrific swipe at Coo-Cullen with his sword. The small, sad Ulsterman side-stepped it cautiously, and bringing his own sword down like a scythe he cut the earth from underneath the feet of the fighting man from Cork. He didn't want to harm the young lad. The roars of the crowd so angered the Corkman, however, that he would not stop, but rushed on Coo-Cullen with a wild fighting scream. Coo-Cullen tried to stop him again by flashing his sword across his head so closely that he cut off the Corkman's hair, but still the Corkman wouldn't stop, so, with a sigh, Coo-Cullen cut him down.

The army did not get far that day, nor the next day, nor the next. Coo-Cullen sadly killed all the champions that Maeve sent against him, so that in five months the Irish army had barely got more than five miles the other side of the river, and over a hundred of the best fighting men had been killed. Queen Maeve was livid with fury. She began to send Coo-Cullen's old friends against him, and in the middle of the fifth month she demanded that Darky go against Coo-Cullen. It was a dour and bloody fight that resulted. Darky had to be killed by Coo-Cullen, and it was agony to the small dark hero to do it, but in dying Darky badly wounded Coo-Cullen.

Coo-Cullen had been fighting now every day, except Sundays, for over five months, and the small, dark man was wearing down. He had been wounded several times, and he never had had a chance to get the wounds attended to. It was looking black for Coo-Cullen as well as for the women and children of Ulster, not forgetting the brown bull of Cooley, and then Maeve pulled her trump card. She sent for Skin-Horn, and sent him out against Coo-Cullen.

The nearest approach to Coo-Cullen in the world was this same Skin-Horn. He was Coo-Cullen's dearest friend. They had been raised together in the court of King Connor, but Queen Maeve injected a poison into Skin-Horn's veins so that he thought that Coo-Cullen had murdered Darky, who was their mutual friend, and Skin-Horn, all furious and misled, went out, fresh and angry and souped-up, to fight against Coo-Cullen who was

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tired and sad at the slaughter that he had had to perform, and was more weary than any mortal man has a right to be.

That fight was one of the bitterest the world has ever seen. It went on for three whole days, during which the Irish army crept further and further into Ulster. It was so furious a fight that the shields gave way at the seams, and both Coo-Cullen and Skin-Horn broke their swords. So close had Coo-Cullen and Skin-Horn been as friends that they knew one another's plays, and Coo-Cullen was wounded near to death, poor, tired small man, before, with a sob, he finally dealt the mortal blow to Skin-Horn. The Irish army stopped again, and Maeve ordered another champion to meet Coo-Cullen in the morning, and to finish him off. Coo-Cullen was near to death that night.

In the morning, try as he would, he could not rise from his couch of heather. The only ones of King Connor's court, besides Coo-Cullen, that had escaped the trick of Mickey Finn were the brigade of boys who were training there, and in the morning they boldly placed themselves between the rest of Ulster and the prevailing Irish. Now the Irish would not normally fight against boys, but they had been trying to get into Ulster for five long months now, so they took the boys on, while the bleeding Coo-Cullen, with a broken leg and a fractured arm, dealt him by Skin-Horn, watched in helpless agony while all the boys went down to death for Ulster. Still, their heroism saved the day, for they held off the Irish army for a whole long and bloody week, and the glory of their dying raised such a keen of sorrow among the mothers of Ulster that it awakened King Connor and the warriors from their doped sleep, and just in time the Ulstermen arrived at the scene of the battle of the Boys' Brigade to avenge them, and to drive Queen Maeve and her army headlong out of Ulster.

Coo-Cullen recovered from his many wounds and became the darling of Ulster, but his natural sadness was made even more pronounced by the death of his young Boys' Brigade and by the killing of his friends by his hand. Slowly, and too late, Coo-Cullen realized that the glory of being a great warrior was a bitter sort of sweetness. Too late he realized that although he was destined for glory, and had won great renown, the price of such fame was out of all proportion. It was too late to turn back at that time, even had he wanted to. Queen Maeve had sworn revenge, and had offered her kingdom to any man who could overcome Coo-Cullen. It was the hate of this evil woman that was to bring the Hound of Ulster to his death, for no swordsman can fight against the wiles of a foul queen as Coo-Cullen was to find out, to his sorrow and to his everlasting glory.

Queen Maeve's cattle raid on Cooley failed because of Coo-Cullen and the heroism of the boys of Ulster, but had King Connor known what was

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to result he would have given Queen Maeve the brown bull, and would have served her as a slave himself. But men never can tell what lies ahead, and that is both a sorrow and a blessing to mankind, as will be seen from the next story.

IV

ALL GOOD THINGS come to an end, and they generally end far too soon, while bad things tend to linger on. So it was with Coo-Cullen, to the sorrow of his people. He came to his death when most young men are thinking of starting to live, but instead of thinking about a girl with shining hair and a houseful of children poor Coo-Cullen had to fight the lonely and bitter fight against the Death-Man that all men must undergo sooner or later, but always better later. He had no family around him when he died, but only an unfriendly and hating enemy, and his only creature companions were the lonely badger and the greedy vulture.

It was Queen Maeve who brought Coo-Cullen to his death. She had never forgiven him since the time that he had stopped her from raging through Ulster with her army, and from rustling the brown bull of Cooley. She swore she would get him, and because hate makes people mad she was content to rot forever as long as she could put out the shining light of honor that was the small dark Ulster hero. All over the world she sent her servants to gather schemes to fix Coo-Cullen. Her servants were very wary about accepting any scheme unless it was tried and true, for they all had the unfortunate Mickey Finn still hanging in their mind's eye. At last all the schemes were gathered together and pondered upon, and then they were used against Coo-Cullen.

First Queen Maeve started a whispering campaign against the lad. Because he was shy and never boastful the rumor went around that Coo-Cullen was getting high and mighty, and too proud to talk to the common people of Ulster. The whispers reached Coo-Cullen, and they hurt him more than any wound had ever done, but he could no more talk about the sadness that such rumors caused him than he could boast about his feats of arms. A bad person always has an advantage over a good person for that very reason, because no ordinary decent man will ever argue hotly against lies that are told about him; he will just let them fester in his heart, and that is why lying and talebearing is far more sinful than the honest clout or the shouted curse.

When the whispering campaign was going really well, Queen Maeve imported some horrid experts in the arts of lying. These liars came from

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Wales, and they moved around the people and told them that Coo-Cullen had killed all his best friends, as indeed he had, but they said that he had killed them by tricks and poison because he was jealous and afraid of them. The people began to believe the liars. If any liar is impudent enough, and the lie is told often enough, people tend to believe it, especially if it is a preposterous one. Gradually the people began to avoid Coo-Cullen's company, and the small dark man was deeply hurt by the defection of his own people. More and more he tended to keep himself to himself, and he and his driver used to spend weeks, alone, out hunting in the woods. The more he avoided people the more the people believed the lies that were told about him. The one man who would never listen to any words against Coo-Cullen was King Connor himself, and he suffered more than Coo-Cullen, for in many ways he was the more sensitive man of the two. Moreover, King Connor, although a great and a famous warrior, had had a far happier and fuller life than poor Coo-Cullen, because he was born to it, whereas poor Coo-Cullen had had to choose one thing or the other. King Connor was worried about Coo-Cullen, but there is nothing that even a king can do for his friend if the people turn against him. People are the most important people, far more important than kings or heroes, once a lot of them get a fixed idea into their heads, like the French did when they threw the king down, or like the Americans, when they soaked the tea.

Queen Maeve wasn't just after Coo-Cullen, she was also after all of Ulster, and the great King Connor. She knew that words alone would never wear Coo-Cullen down, so she had her soldiers trained in all the ways of war, and she imported experts to teach them all the fighting tricks. She was quite happy about the way things were going, with the schools of sword-play and the spearing, until a wee, black fellow came in to call one day with a contraption that put all the rest of the fighting ways out of her mind for good and all. The wee, black man was a pygmy out of darkest Africa, and he showed Queen Maeve how a blowpipe and a poisoned dart could lay low the mightiest warrior, although the man behind the blowpipe was no bigger than the pygmy himself. Queen Maeve just refused to believe the little blackamoor until he coaxed her into letting him challenge any warrior of her court to combat. At first none of the swank heroes would even bother to accept the pygmy challenge, until at length Queen Maeve ordered black McCarthy to try out against the little stranger. No sooner did McCarthy start to rush against him, waving his sword, than the little pygmy put the blowpipe to his lips and — Puff! — the dart entered McCarthy's chest and he lay down stiff as a board for all eternity.

Queen Maeve gave the black man plenty of money for the blowpipe-poison-dart process, and she put the weapon into immediate production,

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and equipped all her army with it. It was a dirty thing to do, but it was what was to be expected of that wicked woman. After that it wasn't only poisoned words but poisoned darts that she was pointing against Coo-Cullen. It's a good thing to know that it is even among the Irish themselves there were such villains. The English could not be blamed for all these mean actions, because the English were still swinging from tree to tree at this time when the Irish were all so civilized as to be using propaganda and poison.

So upset was King Connor at the way Coo-Cullen was being treated that he went off to Scotland on a visit, leaving Coo-Cullen, who hadn't the heart to go, alone, among the hostile people of Ulster.

The occasion was just the one that Queen Maeve had been expecting. No sooner had King Connor left Ulster's shore than she marched her army against Ulster. Her huge array soon disposed of the champions that King Connor had left at the passes into Ulster, and before the women and children of Ulster had a chance to look around they were at the mercy of her cruel soldiers. Coo-Cullen, as usual, because of the whispering campaign, was away in quiet places. One night he saw a glow in the sky near his mother's house, so, all unwitting, he drove across in his chariot to see what was going on. He just got there in time to see his mother's house burning to the ground, and his dear mother being dragged along by her hair to become a slave to Queen Maeve. Men never knew what happened to that raiding party of Queen Maeve.

He must have chopped them up into little pieces, and then, putting his mother in a safe place, he rode against the whole army of Ireland. The Ulster people, when they saw him riding past, forgot all the old vicious stories about him, and blessed him as he stormed past them in a cloud of dust. Coo-Cullen was become again the Hound of Ulster. Some of them, with more sense, caught a boat for Scotland, to tell King Connor what was going on, and all the while Coo-Cullen held off the army of Queen Maeve.

He did not challenge them to single combat this time, because he could no longer trust the word of the Queen, but all night and day he hovered and worried their flanks, worrying them and killing the sluggards, just like the hound he was. His harassing tactics however could not completely hold up the army of Queen Maeve, which daily inched further and further into Ulster. At length Coo-Cullen could allow them to go no further, for right in front of the advancing army the women had taken refuge with their children, and Coo-Cullen knew what would happen to them if once Queen Maeve got hold of them. So one fine morning in September the army saw Coo-Cullen, fully dressed as a warrior, in his chariot, his driver beside him, standing right in the path. Coo-Cullen was at bay for Ulster, and a long

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sigh went up from the Irish host, for they knew that many of them would die that day.

Coo-Cullen was out of range of the blowpipes. Moreover a strong breeze was blowing his battle standard straight out from its pole, so Queen Maeve sent her cavalry against him. Just like in his first fight, against the boys of the King's House, Coo-Cullen had cunningly chosen his ground, where the path was narrow, between two high hills, so that only about five of the Irish cavalry could come against him at one time. All day long he slaughtered them, until his arm grew tired, and the pass was littered with the corpses and the carcasses of the Irish and their horses. It was a hunter's moon that night, so the fight went on after dark, and by dawn Coo-Cullen could hardly be seen across the mound of dead as the Irish infantry clambered over them after him. At last a blowpiper got within range, and let Coo-Cullen have it, right between the eyes.

A moment later his driver was wounded with a spear, and he turned on Coo-Cullen and said: "That is the first time, Hound, that you have let a spear past you to hit me."

Coo-Cullen smiled as well as he could and said: "It didn't get past me, my heart of corn, it went through me." And so it had.

The end was near, and King Connor still far away. As the driver lay dying, Coo-Cullen staggered to a tree, and tied himself so that he could not fall, and faced the enemy that way. Although he was near to his death from his gaping wounds, and from the poison, none of the Irish dared approach him all that day and the next, and Coo-Cullen glared at them, grasping his sword and spear, until, from afar off he heard the skirl of King Connor's army coming. Queen Maeve stood on the mound of dead, and stared at Coo-Cullen closely, leaning up against the tree. Then she started, and with a wild shout she ran toward Coo-Cullen, for her sharp and beady eyes had noticed at the hero's feet was a badger drinking Coo-Cullen's dripping blood, while overhead a vulture was circling easily, with all the time in the world to spare.

Coo-Cullen cared not at all. He knew that Ulster was safe now, and that his time had come. He undid the rope that bound him to the tree, and, on hands and knees, because there was no strength in him, he crawled amid the feet of the silent, staring Irish, and lifted a water bottle off one of the men he had killed. He lifted it shakingly to his mouth and drank and sighed deeply. Then he looked straight through the baffled Queen Maeve and smiled and died, going to join the other soldiers of all ages and climes in the queer limbo of Fiddlers' Green, where those men go who have fought the good fight, but have only known the joy of battle and have never seen the splendor of the Rising Son of God.

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Blood in the Cellar: an Ozark Folk Tale

One time there was a woman getting supper for her man, and she thought he would come in from the field pretty soon, so she was in a big hurry. The woman told the little girl to go down cellar and fetch some potatoes. She went down the steep stairs into the dark cellar. It seemed like the stairs was steeper than common, and the cellar was all black only one place right by the 'tater pile, where a little thin light come in.

When she got to the light place, the little girl seen a big clot of blood. It was laying on the bare ground, because they didn't have any floor in the cellar. And then come a voice right out of the 'tater pile: "If you tell your mother about my blood, I'll come and GET you!" The little girl was scared, so she run back up the steps and told her mother. But the woman says: "Nonsense!" And then she says: "Go straight down cellar and get the 'taters, like I told you."

So the little girl went down the steep stairs again, and it seemed like they was getting steeper all the time. The cellar got darker all the time, too, only at one place.

When she come to the light spot by the 'tater pile, the blood was still laying there, with a head grown onto one end of it. And then come the voice again: "If you tell your mother about my head, I'll come and GET you!" The little girl was scared, so she run back up the stairs. "It's got a head now, and it said the same thing!" she told her mother. But the woman says: "Nonsense!" And then she says: "Go and get the 'taters, or I will whip you within a inch of your life."

So the little girl went back down cellar, and it seemed like the steps was steeper than ever. The cellar got darker, too, only at one place. When she come to the light spot by the 'tater pile the head was still there, with a great big body grown onto it. "Pick up your 'taters," says the voice, "but if you tell your mother about my body, I'll come and GET you!" The girl looked at the thing pretty careful, and she kind of got over being scared, so she says: "All right." She took the potatoes up the steps, and didn't tell her mother nothing. The woman just cooked the 'taters for supper, and thought no more about it.

That night after the little girl was in bed and the house all dark, she heard big strong steps a-coming across the room. And then a big hand touched her, but it didn't hurt, and she never said nothing. Pretty soon the voice says: "If you had told your mother about my body, I'd have come and GOT you." The girl was kind of used to it by now, and she wasn't scared a bit.

The sun come up mighty fine next morning, with birds a-singing and all. The girl just kind of grinned, and never said a word about the thing that scared her, or what happened in the night. Some folks thought maybe she seen the thing pretty often after that, and there was all kind of stories a-going round. But the little girl never said nothing, and nobody ever did know for sure.

VANCE RANDOLPH

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That versatile and ever unpredictable man, Kris Neville, has written just about every type of science-fantasy that you can name; but one kind he has made distinctively his own: the subtle, small-scale, underplayed story of human personality as it is revealed by the stresses of the future. The many readers who have acclaimed Old Man Henderson *and* Bettyann *as true specimens of future "quality" fiction will find the same intimate sensitivity in this moving study of a social historian poised in tragic loneliness between two cultures a galaxy apart.*

Worship Night

by KRIS NEVILLE

Looking down at the desk, Wilma ran a wrinkled hand over the wood, feeling the texture of it. "How was work this morning?"

"Fine."

Without turning to him, she said, "It's been nice this morning. There was a breeze coming in from the swamp."

"It was nice down at the office, too."

"Well," she said, "I guess you may as well phone for the trans."

George walked to the phone. With one hand resting on it, he paused. "I thought maybe the air was a little stale."

Facing him, leaning against the desk, she said, "I guess it was a little stale. The swamp is burbling again. That makes it smell stale."

"You get so you don't mind, though." His hand was still on the phone.

"You hardly notice it."

"You come to expect it."

"Remember how you used to hate the kia birds?"

Rubbing her hand behind her on the desk, she turned her attention to the window. "They don't scream as loud as they used to. The one on the roof top over there, he's been sitting all morning without once crying."

"Well, I better phone for the trans."

"All right, we're ready, I guess."

He pressed the button for the direct circuit to the lobby. "This is George. We're ready to leave now." He replaced the instrument.

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"The bags are over there," she said. "I sent the rest of the things on this morning."

He looked in the direction of her gesture.

"Your papers. I thought we should keep them with us. I sent everything else."

He crossed to her side. "We're ready, aren't we?"

Wilma looked steadily at the divan. "There's a very worn place on the left arm. You used to sit on that side all the time."

He nodded, watching her.

"The sunset," she said, "always fell across our swinging mirror. If you stamped your foot to shake it, the light would swing in a half arc across the ceiling: from that corner to that little crack."

He went to the bags. His old body bent under their weight. "You never know how heavy the papers you've been saving are." He turned wearily toward the door. "The trans ought to be there by now."

"I'm ready." She looked once more around the room. Then suddenly she said, "I've forgotten something. Go on, I'll get it."

"I'll wait."

"It's right here." She moved toward the bed room. "A packet of cjei," she called gayly. "It's Worship Night."

"I'd forgotten."

He had put down the bags. "I just noticed that stain over there, Wilma. The ink stain I made, remember? I wonder if they'll be able to take it off after we've gone?"

"I could never get it off."

Awkwardly they stood staring at each other.

"I left some bread on the sill for the kia birds again," she said. "I suppose they'll come over, when we leave. They always wait until I'm not watching."

"I guess we better go."

"You'll have your hands full. I'll get the door." She brushed past him, touching his sleeve lightly with her hand. She opened the door inward.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Watson."

"Why! You startled me! George, it's Igi!"

"Good afternoon, Igi."

"Good afternoon, sir." Igi peered down at George with his great, gentle, nearsighted eyes. "I came to wish you goodby, sir."

"That's very kind of you." George put down the two bags, looked up, and cleared his throat.

Igi looked beyond them into the vacant rooms. "It will seem strange to have someone else living here."

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"You come visit us often, Igi," Wilma said.

"That's very kind of you, ma'am." He remained motionless.

"Well, thank you, thank you very much." George extended his hand. "And you be sure to come like Wilma said."

Igi took the hand firmly. "Goodby, sir."

"Goodby."

"Take care of yourselves, both of you."

"We will," Wilma said.

George bent for the bags.

"Please," Igi said, reaching down.

"No." George laid a restraining hand on Igi's wrist. "I couldn't let the manager carry my bags."

"Of course I will, sir," Igi said firmly.

In the elevator going to the roof, the operator said, "Goodby, Mrs. Watson. Goodby, Mr. Watson. All of us here will miss you."

"Goodby," said the cook, waiting on the roof.

"Goodby," said the off-duty clerk.

"Fly carefully," said Igi to the transpilot.

In the trans, they stared out at the city, rapidly spinning away like unreeling yarn.

"I'll miss it," he said, blinking.

They were over the old, precolonial section: the small houses, the unpaved streets, the ageless, antecommercial quiet. Back lay the new keji factories, the space port, the tall, colonial style hotel, the huge, functional tower of Colonial Administration. The new city towered in the sunlight, sparkled at plastic windows, square, blunt, and sightless.

"I suppose I'll miss the job," he said. "I'd thought, I'd expected, some of them would have come down to see us off. After twenty years, I'd sort of expected something like that."

"We'll soon have new friends in Jeuni." Wilma reached across for his hand; she let hers rest lightly over his. "Like Igi and the hotel staff."

"I guess they're saying we've gone native," he said. "It's not fair to you, Wilma. To make you come away like this. It's not fair to have to uproot you like this."

"Nonsense, don't talk like that."

From the space port a gleaming cargo ship struggled skyward, slowly, heavily at first, gradually accelerating in flame until it became a blur, a streak, a point; and at last only a smoky tracer fluttering uncertainly in the air, collapsing.

"I shouldn't have bought the house. We should have used the money

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to go back to Earth," George said. "They all thought I was crazy not to take the chair in history they offered me back there."

"Don't, don't," she said quietly.

"Well, that's past, Wilma. That's over, now. We're cut off from them for good, I guess. They didn't even come down to tell us goodby."

They were over the eternal swamp, burbling its gases. Below, pontooned up, the movable road wound like a tattered ribbon toward the work camp; and in the sunlight they saw a group of natives, tiny specks, chopping down the straight, slender keji, and on the road ribbon a long car, loaded with cut logs, headed toward the factories in the city.

"You have many things to write about," Wilma said. "Let's think about that. Let's think about the future. The past is dead, it doesn't matter, we're not a part of it any more."

"Yes," he said, staring down at the camp smoke. "That's right. We have to live in the future."

"You can use the old library at Jeuni. Think of that! And the people there will help you, George. You'll get to know them and understand them. That's what's important. You've got to put all that in the book. The history of this planet, the strength of the people, their way of life: you've got to get all that down before it's past and lost. If you don't do it, no one will, George. It's passing. In another twenty years it will be too late, ever."

The swamp ended; a mountain ridge loomed up, isolating it from the land beyond. The ridge was vastly old and time-polished, and flying over it, they could see green vegetation growing in the dirt that wind had long ago deposited in its granite cracks.

Beyond the ridge was the valley of Jeuni, terribly impermanent in the face of the outside world. The capital province of a forgotten dynasty, rich in ruins, racial echoes, and folk memory.

The trans began to drop.

The valley was densely green bordering the wandering Cali river; less densely so as it spread toward the mountain boundaries on three sides. The grain fields were straightly laid and crudely cultivated and overflowing with wavering richness.

The trans changed its course and nosed toward the tiny city at the river junction.

There were no massive, monolithic buildings there of steel and plastic; they were small and dingy and greenish, time-tarnished alabaster.

The trans touched ground, shook, and was still.

After a moment, George alighted and helped his wife down. Together they stood looking toward the old city which stretched carelessly away to their left. Then he turned, and the pilot handed down the paper-heavy bags.

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"Thank you," he said, and he paid the native with a crisp bill.

Then they stood alone, and the trans turned back toward the ridge and melted into the sky.

"Someone will drive down to get us," George said.

At the nearest house, nearly a quarter away, a native paused, peered curiously at them, and then turned back to his work.

Finally from the direction of the central area, an ancient, rattling Earth ground-car bounced roughly across the field toward them. When it arrived, it sputtered to a stop, and its driver waited in silence.

George said in the native language, "Good afternoon."

Silence.

George shifted his feet.

Silence.

He bent to the bags. Wilma opened the back door, and he struggled to get them inside. He helped her up and then got in himself, closing the door gently.

He read the address from a crumpled paper.

The driver, an old, bitter-eyed native, grunted wordlessly. Without looking around, he started the engine, spun the ground-car sharply and sent it hurtling roughly over the field toward Jeuni.

Their new home was waiting. A long lawn led from the ground-car to the columned porch. Wind stirred in the grove of trees to the left.

George got out of the car, helped Wilma down, and struggled again with the bags. To the driver he said, "How much?"

"A seni, four."

George handed him a bill. "Keep the rest."

Without looking directly at him, the driver stuffed the bill into his shabby jacket. The delicate bone structure of his body, the soft, clean erectness of him, seemed to collapse and twist upon itself with self-revilement. The car began to move away.

Wilma bit her lip.

The ground-car gained speed, rounded the corner, and was gone. Its fumes hung heavily on the air.

Turning from the road, George said, "I'll have to put in work on the yard. . . . It hasn't been cared for."

". . . and, and the windows need curtains," Wilma said.

"The house, paint." He waved his hands with forced enthusiasm.

"And a flower garden there."

"And a hammock between those two trees."

They began to laugh encouragement to each other.

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"A little rock pond by that charto; and over there, a bird bowl."

"For the kia birds: if they come this far inland."

"We should be able to afford some ornamental stones," George said. "I'm pretty good — I used to be — at building things. My hands don't show it now. Near where my father used to live there was an abandoned quarry, and I brought rocks — heavy ones, some of them as much as 70, 75 pounds — up to the yard, and . . ."

"George, look! They left all the furniture out. There by the side of the house."

His lips drew into an angry line. "They could have taken it inside," he said indignantly. "You'd think they would."

"It wasn't nice to leave it out this way. If it were to rain . . ."

Looking wearily at the sky, he said, "I'll bring it in tomorrow. Another day won't hurt."

Slowly they crossed the lawn to the small stack of their personal furniture; they looked down at it. George set the bags beside their belongings as if to increase the mass.

"It isn't much for a life time," he said. "It isn't much to start with, so far away from, from . . ."

The wind blew in from across the Cali and stirred the strange blue-leaved trees. The first far star winked in the sky across an incredible eternity of time and space.

"There's the old oak table, and . . . I guess it's all here. I hope they didn't break any of the glass."

"I'll bring it all in tomorrow," he said, looking up at the sky which was bright and clear but westward just starting to twilight rose and purple.

Clutching the bundle of cjei closely to her body, she said, "We'll have to eat from cans tonight."

"All right."

"They'll be cold."

"I'm not really hungry," George said.

They looked at each other. "We may as well go inside," Wilma said.

"All right."

It was bare. The rooms were hollowly bleak, echoing with dusty footfalls. The walls were impersonal, neutral and cold. The naked windows opened out over the ragged lawn.

"I'll bring in some chairs," he said.

He went outside. Coming back, carrying the chairs awkwardly, he became lodged in the doorway. He had to struggle a moment before he could break through into the room.

Wilma was crying.

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He hurried to her. "Don't cry," he said. "Please don't, now, please, Wilma. Look, we'll go back to the city tomorrow, there's Igi, and the staff, we'll be able to get our old room. . . ."

"No, no, no. Don't, George. We're not beaten. I'm being silly, I shouldn't cry. We're going to stay, of course we are. I'll be all right in a minute. There's nothing wrong. Everything's going to be fine. It's going to be just like we planned it."

"Of course, dear, of course it will."

"I'm just upset. I'll be all right. Just let me alone a minute."

George stood helplessly at her side. "There," he said. "There, there . . . I'll, I'll see if there's something to burn out back. We'll make a fire. We'll bring the bed in and put it before the fireplace, and sleep right here in our living room."

When the fire was burning, when the bed was in, they sat in silence, staring at the crackling flames, eating from the cans.

"It's good," he said.

She stood up, glanced at the roll of bedding on the barren bed. She crossed to it and began to spread it out.

"I'll help." He put aside his can.

He took one end of the blanket, pulled it tight, tucked it in.

"I'm sorry about crying," Wilma said. "I'm all right now."

"Just for tonight," he said. "It'll be changed tomorrow. We'll move the bed in there. . . ."

Running one hand over her high forehead to lift back a stray wisp of gray hair, she said, "The house will seem brighter with curtains."

"And we'll get to know the natives. It will be different then."

"Yes."

"I wonder who lives across the yard," he said.

The room had turned dusk, and the sputtering, hissing fire warring with darkness established a slowly retreating defense perimeter beyond the bed.

"They will be here soon for the Worship gift," she said.

The bed was made, and they returned once more to their chairs, grateful now of the fire's warmth.

They waited. The fire muttered; once, she started to speak, but changed her mind.

"Dear . . ." he said.

"Yes?"

"Never mind."

The fire's perimeter retreated to the near side of the bed, and a little shower of sparks flowed as an ashy log broke and settled.

"Listen," she said. "There's the drum. The procession's begun."

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Her husband inclined his head. "Yes, it has."

Suddenly radiant, she reached toward the cjei. "I'm glad I remembered."

"It will be a good way to start. They'll know we understand them, if we have cjei."

The festive procession was nearer and louder, as other families joined in from the houses being passed.

"They're next door, I think."

"They'll be here next," she said.

She half turned to face the front window. She was holding her breath.

"They're leaving next door now," George said.

"I wish we could ask them in. But it's so — so *bare*."

After a moment, he said, "They're out front now."

The fire sighed in the grate; the gentle wind fluttered a broken shutter softly in the back of the house.

They listened to each other's breathing.

Finally he said, "They didn't stop. They saw the light, but they didn't stop. I, I knew they wouldn't, Wilma." He slumped forward toward the fire, held his old, wrinkled hands toward it, avoided looking toward his wife's face. "We'll need a fire like this every night, if it gets this cold all the time," he said. "We've forgotten, haven't we? We've lived over twenty years in one apartment in one city. We've forgotten."

The house creaked, settling; the room was isolated from full moonlight by a tree branch almost brushing the window: the light came through splattered and distorted.

"Was it five years before Igi came to speak to us? How long before he came to us for cjei? I don't know, I don't remember." His voice was small and lonely and frightened. "We're not going to have time. We're not young any more; we don't have another twenty years."

"Oh, now," she said. "Here, now. It just takes a little time, George. See, I'm not crying any more. We're not beaten."

The fire died away to silence. Neither moved; neither spoke. Finally, listlessly, he poked the grate. "We may as well go to bed," he said, sighing.

As George stood up, there came a soft tap at the door.

His face suddenly alive, he half turned.

"Let me go," Wilma said, retrieving the cjei. "Let me go."

"Hurry."

She crossed swiftly from the faint illumination of the dying cinders to the gloom of the doorway.

When she opened the door, pale moonlight entered, outlining the caller.

"Why, it's a little girl!" Then, in the native language, "Come in, child."

The child withdrew half a step, her wide brown eyes opening in surprise

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and fear. Her fragile, delicate face, her wispy, wind-worried hair, seemed composed of foam and moonlight. Her skin was almost luminous and almost transparent. "Oh! I thought . . ." She half turned.

"Wait, please wait, child."

"I . . . I didn't know. I just came home. I saw your light. I thought they'd missed you. I thought our new neighbors were — going to be like us. I better go."

"We are like you, child," Wilma said.

"No, you're not," the child said, shaking her head. "You're like . . . them."

Wilma continued to smile. Her husband, who stood behind her now, blinked his eyes uncertainly and steadied her trembling arm.

Wilma laughed lightly. "Come in, child."

"My people wouldn't want me to."

George's hand tightened reassuringly.

"Here, then, wait." Wilma held out the wrapped cjei. "You came for these?"

"Not from . . . I . . ."

"Take them, child."

The child shifted. Slowly, reluctantly, she held out her hand. "These are very many."

"It's to thank Him for letting us come to this wonderful planet to live."

The child blinked and half smiled. Then, taking the cjei, she turned and ran across the yard in the direction of the ceremonial fire which was coloring the sky at the far end of the road.

"Hear their chants?"

"The night air smells strange," George said. "We'll come to like it."

"That child. She was very sweet."

He put an arm around Wilma.

The child, a tiny speck of gray in the moonlight, turned at the roadway and waved to them.

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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

THE BEST THING, from a reviewer's viewpoint, about prize awards is that they enable him to call his readers' attention afresh to first-rate books that they may have overlooked. So it's with hearty pleasure that we list the two 1953 International Fantasy Award books and the four runners-up — all volumes warmly recommended here on their original appearance.

The IFA prize for fiction went, most deservedly, to Clifford D. Simak's literally wonderful stories of a future of dogs and robots after the passing of man, CITY (Gnome, $2.75); and the second and third places were taken by fiction of almost equal stature: Cyril M. Kornbluth's melodrama of the immediate future of space travel, TAKEOFF (Doubleday, $2.75), and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.'s fine blend of science fiction with the main-stream novel, PLAYER PIANO (Scribner's, $3).

First place in non-fiction was won by two of the most eruditely entertaining of scientific writers, L. Sprague de Camp and Willy Ley, for their collaborative history of man's credulity, LANDS BEYOND (Rinehart, $4.75). The runners-up, each again not unworthy of a first prize, were Cornelius Ryan's vivid symposium from "Collier's," ACROSS THE SPACE FRONTIER (Viking, $3.95), and Martin Gardner's splendid study of crack-pottery posing as scientific thought, IN THE NAME OF SCIENCE (Putnam, $4). If you've missed any of these six books, we hope these awards will stimulate you to discover some of the best reading of recent times.

A completely new device of structure and approach is exceedingly scarce in either detective stories or fantasies; scarcer by geometrical progression is a totally novel device which straddles both fields. We leave it to the most adept slipstick users among our readers to calculate the odds against such a device, never before employed in a novel, appearing almost simultaneously in two books published within a fortnight of each other. Yet that is precisely what has just happened with Guy Cullingford's POST MORTEM (Lippincott, $2.50) and J. B. O'Sullivan's I DIE POSSESSED (Mill-Morrow, $2.50). The device is the extremely attractive one of the narration of a murder case by the ghost of the victim, himself greatly puzzled by his abrupt demise, constantly revising his knowledge of his most intimate associates and their attitudes toward him, and eventually, as detective, finding the solution to his own murder. The Irish Mr. O'Sullivan wastes this ingenious notion on

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a foolish, almost parodistic imitation of the American "private eye" detective story; but the British Mr. Cullingford does it full justice, in a witty, sardonic, perceptive novel of character, with a clever ending admirably poised (like Richard Sale's Captain McGrail stories) between fantasy and "normal" criminology — a book strongly recommended as perhaps the brightest offtrail item of "pure" fantasy since Kem Bennett's THE FABULOUS WINK.

A magnificent success, both in romance and wonder, is STAR RANGERS, by Andre Norton (Harcourt, Brace, $2.95). As Miss Norton says in her prolog, there is an old legend concerning a Roman emperor who commanded a too-loyal legion to march across Asia to the end of the world. And, in 8054 A. D., history repeated itself in the crumbling First Galactic Empire when a dictator of Deneb rid himself of the restraints of the Stellar Patrol by assigning it to locate and re-map a forgotten system. Her book is the story of the Patrol's journey's end and it is remarkable not only for her adroit handling of a theme that has been treated, by less imaginative writers, with something less than adequacy, for her creation of wholly convincing aliens and unstereotyped telepaths, but also for engrossing adventure drama that is skilfully set on a small stage against the massive background of intergalactic intrigue and decadence.

Since a shorter version of Ward Moore's BRING THE JUBILEE (Farrar, Straus & Young, $2; Ballantine, 35¢) appeared in this magazine we feel that we may not be qualified to give an objective review to his novel of time travel and of an alternate universe wherein the South won the Civil War. But we should stress that this book is 60% longer than the magazine novelet. A thoroughly justified increase in background detail and depth of characterization offers a vivid, wholly new reading experience even to those, like us, who know the first rendition almost by heart.

The only new science fiction anthology at this writing (and the eleventh of 1953) is Frederik Pohl's SHADOW OF TOMORROW (Permabooks, 35¢). To our taste, this is a somewhat less discriminating job than Mr. Pohl's previous editorial efforts; it's by far his longest collection (at least as long as two issues of an average magazine), and much of the wordage consists of undistinguished treatments of overfamiliar hack ideas. But the good stories included are more than worth the price, particularly an absorbingly detailed Heinlein novelet, short stories of high distinction by Fritz Leiber, Wilson Tucker and James Blish and enough other Grade A or B+ reading to overflow any single magazine. Of the seventeen stories, only two (including one of C. M. Kornbluth's finest) have been previously reprinted.

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I've Got a Little List

I've read s. f. for many years, and here's what I have found:
I've got a little list — I've got a little list
Of authors who take certain themes and run 'em in the ground.
They'd none of 'em be missed — They'd none of 'em be missed!
There's the fellow who is daffy on his synergetic plan —
The guy who writes the tales about the latent superman —
The humorist who thinks anachronisms are such fun —
The engineer who formulates each brand-new ship or gun —
And the fellow with the bugs and stuff, the sex-biologist,
I don't think *he'd* be missed — I'm *sure* he'd not be missed!

There's the fiendish fellow who burns up the sun or puts it out,
The astrophysicist! I've got *him* on the list!
And the guy whose noble heroes kick the common clods about,
The scientologist! I don't think *he'll* be missed!
And the lad who writes the tales about the interstellar tramps
Who flit about the Galaxy in king-size hobo camps —
The guy who rewrites Toynbee, with some Gibbon added, too,
And calls it "psycho-history" to sound like something new —
And the married pair who dote upon the psychoanalyst —
They'd none of 'em be missed — They'd none of 'em be missed!

There's the lass who lifts from Omar K. and shifts the scene to Mars —
I've got her on the list — I've got her on the list!
And the world-assassinator who keeps blowing up the stars,
The cataclysmatist — I don't think he'd be missed!
And the chronic Martian writer with the anti-social quirks
Who thinks that human beings all are stupid, childish jerks —
And the saintly little stories of a theologic kind,
All written by the editor of — Oh, well, never mind!
And at least a dozen others I could put upon the list;
And they'd none of 'em be missed — They'd none of 'em be missed!

— RANDALL GARRETT

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One of Cleve Cartmill's specialties has always been the subject of wishes; and you might even think that he and that other specialist, E. Mayne Hull, in the Golden Period of Unknown, *had covered between them every logical disaster that might come from the reckless or unthinking use of the power to wish. But Mr. Cartmill's dark imagination can envision still other possibilities, such as the grisly one related in this, his latest cautionary tale.*

My Lady Smiles

by CLEVE CARTMILL

He tried not to think of the word for a long time, but it finally emerged on the conscious level. *Murder.* He was going to kill his wife.

It was a matter of privacy, he told himself. Everybody has to be alone once in a while, he rationalized. Too much of a good thing can sometimes lead to killing, he said in his mind. Myra, slender and dark in the big chair, had become too much of a good thing.

Twenty-four hours a day, 60 minutes each hour, 60 seconds each minute for five long years had become unendurable. The little guy had warned him, but Jerry was young and scorned advice. He made the wish with Myra, when the little guy appeared after they found the four-leaf clover.

Somehow, they hadn't been surprised when the little guy popped out of nowhere. It was in keeping with the magic of the day, their first day after their first night together.

"All right," the little guy had snapped. "So you stumbled on to the formula. I'll grant you one wish. I have to. Humans!" he snarled.

"One wish," Myra had said dreamily. "One wish."

It was beautiful then, in their first fine flush of pleasure with each other.

One wish. "Never let us part," she said. And Jerry added, "Never, alive or dead."

"Granted," the little guy growled, and vanished. He popped back immediately. "You'll be sorry," he warned, and disappeared again.

And how right he was, Jerry thought. I'm not only sorry, I'm desperate. Am I desperate to the point of insanity? *I don't know*, he thought in despair; *I don't know.*

And what are you killing? he asked himself. Myra? No, because she's

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dead in your mind already. The past? No. That's buried. The future? N-o-o-o. You can't. You can kill only *now*. Today. This hour, this minute.

You can kill only this burden that a wish on a four-leaf clover wrapped around your neck. You must.

How do you do it? Quickly, cleanly. Walk across the room, pick up that letter opener.

She looked up at him darkly as he approached. "Darling," she said. "Hello, darling."

Slash. It was done. *She has two mouths*, he thought. *One at the base of her throat.*

Then the little guy appeared. He stood in the middle of the book-lined room, teetering on his turned-up shoes. He lashed his tail once.

"Jerry," he said. "I can almost feel sorry for you. Almost . . .

"Remember your wish?" he asked pleasantly.

Jerry's laugh was half-snarl. "We're parted, aren't we?"

He started to move. Anywhere, anywhere away from Myra and away from the little guy who was quoting, " 'Never let us part. Never, alive or dead.' "

He stopped abruptly. " 'Never . . . Alive or dead . . .' You mean because she's dead, I . . . ?" He looked frantically around the room, as if he expected to see his own dead body lying there beside her.

That wasn't what he saw.

"Oh no," said the little guy. "Not at all. Quite otherwise, in fact. The river," he added cordially, "is only two blocks away. I'll see you . . . after."

Myra followed Jerry, smiling in two places.

Note:

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The Fall of 1953 is, Heaven be praised, to be Sturgeon Season. It's been three years since the last appearance of a Sturgeon book; but now, about the time this magazine comes out, Farrar, Straus & Young and Ballantine will jointly publish THE FABULOUS IDIOT, *a novel expanded from that wonderful novelet of Homo gestalt,* BABY IS THREE; *and some time next month Abelard will bring out a new collection of Sturgeon short stories,* E PLURIBUS UNICORN, *with an introduction and a bibliography by Groff Conklin. Theodore Sturgeon stands high in that limited company (along with Ray Bradbury, Fritz Leiber and the Kuttners) of those who must be considered not merely top writers of science-fantasy, but among the most creative and stimulating of modern American short-story writers; and we're happy indeed to do our part in celebrating Sturgeon Season with this entrancing tale of magic, cruelty, love, beauty . . . and justice.*

Both Mr. Sturgeon and the editors wish to thank Christine Hamilton for permission to incorporate her poem Unicorn *in this story.*

The Silken-Swift

by THEODORE STURGEON

THERE'S A VILLAGE by the Bogs, and in the village is a Great House. In the Great House lived a squire who had land and treasures and, for a daughter, Rita.

In the village lived Del, whose voice was a thunder in the inn when he drank there; whose corded, cabled body was golden-skinned, and whose hair flung challenges back to the sun.

Deep in the Bogs, which were brackish, there was a pool of purest water, shaded by willows and wide-wondering aspen, cupped by banks of a moss most marvelously blue. Here grew mandrake, and there were strange pipings in midsummer. No one ever heard them but a quiet girl whose beauty was so very contained that none of it showed. Her name was Barbara.

There was a green evening, breathless with growth, when Del took his usual way down the lane beside the manor and saw a white shadow adrift inside the tall iron pickets. He stopped, and the shadow approached, and

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became Rita. "Slip around to the gate," she said, "and I'll open it for you."

She wore a gown like a cloud and a silver circlet round her head. Night was caught in her hair, moonlight in her face, and in her great eyes, secrets swam.

Del said, "I have no business with the squire."

"He's gone," she said. "I've sent the servants away. Come to the gate."

"I need no gate." He leaped and caught the top bar of the fence, and in a continuous fluid motion went high and across and down beside her. She looked at his arms, one, the other; then up at his hair. She pressed her small hands tight together and made a little laugh, and then she was gone through the tailored trees, lightly, swiftly, not looking back. He followed, one step for three of hers, keeping pace with a new pounding in the sides of his neck. They crossed a flower-bed and a wide marble terrace. There was an open door, and when he passed through it he stopped, for she was nowhere in sight. Then the door clicked shut behind him and he whirled. She was there, her back to the panel, laughing up at him in the dimness. He thought she would come to him then but instead she twisted by, close, her eyes on his. She smelt of violets and sandalwood. He followed her into a great hall, quite dark but full of the subdued lights of polished wood, cloisonné, tooled leather and gold-threaded tapestry. She flung open another door, and they were in a small room with a carpet made of rosy silences, and a candle-lit table. Two places were set, each with five different crystal glasses and old silver as prodigally used as the iron pickets outside. Six teakwood steps rose to a great oval window. "The moon," she said, "will rise for us there."

She motioned him to a chair and crossed to a sideboard, where there was a rack of decanters — ruby wine and white; one with a strange brown bead; pink, and amber. She took down the first, and poured. Then she lifted the silver domes from the salvers on the table, and a magic of fragrance filled the air. There were smoking sweets and savories, rare seafood and slivers of fowl, and morsels of strange meat wrapped in flower-petals, spitted with foreign fruits and tiny soft seashells. All about were spices, each like a separate voice in the distant murmur of a crowd: saffron and sesame, cumin and marjoram and mace.

And all the while Del watched her in wonder, seeing how the candles left the moonlight in her face, and how completely she trusted her hands, which did such deftnesses without supervision . . . so composed she was, for all the silent secret laughter that tugged at her lips, for all the bright dark mysteries that swirled and swam within her.

They ate, and the oval window yellowed and darkened while the candle-light grew bright. She poured another wine, and another, and with the

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courses of the meal they were as May to the crocus and as frost to the apple.

Del knew it was alchemy and he yielded to it without question. That which was purposely oversweet would be piquantly cut; this induced thirst would, with exquisite timing, be quenched. He knew she was watching him; he knew she was aware of the heat in his cheeks and the tingle at his fingertips. His wonder grew, but he was not afraid.

In all this time she spoke hardly a word; but at last the feast was over and they rose. She touched a silken rope on the wall, and paneling slid aside. The table rolled silently into some ingenious recess and the panel returned. She waved him to an L-shaped couch in one corner, and as he sat close to her, she turned and took down the lute which hung on the wall behind her. He had his moment of confusion; his arms were ready for her, but not for the instrument as well. Her eyes sparkled, but her composure was unshaken.

Now she spoke, while her fingers strolled and danced on the lute, and her words marched and wandered in and about the music. She had a thousand voices, so that he wondered which of them was truly hers. Sometimes she sang, sometimes it was a wordless crooning. She seemed at times remote from him, puzzled at the turn the music was taking, and at other times she seemed to hear the pulsing roar in his eardrums, and she played laughing syncopations to it. She sang words which he almost understood:

Bee to blossom, honey-dew
Claw to mouse, and rain to tree,
Moon to midnight, I to you;
Sun to starlight, you to me . . .

and she sang something wordless:

Ake ya rundefle, rundefle fye,
Orel ya rundefle kown,
En yea, en yea, ya bunderbee bye
En sor, en see, en sown.

which he also almost understood.

In still another voice she told him the story of a great hairy spider and a little pink girl who found it between the leaves of a half-open book; and at first he was all fright and pity for the child; but then she went on to tell of what the spider suffered, with her home disrupted by this yawping giant, and so vividly did she tell it that at the end he was laughing at himself and all but crying for the poor spider.

So the hours slipped by, and suddenly, between songs, she was in his arms; and in the instant she had twisted up and away from him, leaving him gasping. She said, "No, Del. We must wait for the moon."

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His thighs ached and he realized that he had half-risen, arms out, hands clutching and feeling the extraordinary fabric of her gown though it was gone from them; and he sank back to the couch with an odd, faint sound that was wrong for the room. He flexed his fingers and, reluctantly, the sensation of white gossamer left them. At last he looked across at her and she laughed and leapt high lightly, and it was as if she stopped in midair to stretch for a moment before she alighted beside him, bent and kissed his mouth, and leapt away.

The roaring in his ears was greater, and at this it seemed to acquire a tangible weight. His head bowed; he tucked his knuckles into the upper curve of his eye-sockets and rested his elbows on his knees. He could hear the sweet susurrus of Rita's gown as she moved about the room; he could sense the violets and sandalwood. She was dancing, immersed in the joy of movement and of his nearness. She made her own music, humming, sometimes whispering to the melodies in her mind.

And at length he became aware that she had stopped; he could hear nothing, though he knew she was still near. Heavily he raised his head. She was in the center of the room, balanced like a huge white moth, her eyes quite dark now with their secrets quiet. She was staring at the window, poised, waiting.

He followed her gaze. The big oval was black no longer, but dusted over with silver light. Del rose slowly. The dust was a mist, a loom, and then, at one edge, there was a shard of the moon itself creeping and growing.

Because Del stopped breathing, he could hear her breath; it was rapid and so deep it faintly strummed her versatile vocal cords.

"Rita . . ."

Without answering she ran to the sideboard and filled two small glasses. She gave him one, then, "Wait," she breathed, "oh, wait!"

Spellbound, he waited while the white stain crept across the window. He understood suddenly that he must be still until the great oval was completely filled with direct moonlight, and this helped him, because it set a foreseeable limit to his waiting; and it hurt him, because nothing in life, he thought, had ever moved so slowly . . . he had a moment of rebellion, in which he damned himself for falling in with her complex pacing; but with it he realized that now the darker silver was wasting away, now it was a finger's breadth, and now a thread, and now, and *now* —

She made a brittle feline cry and sprang up the dark steps to the window. So bright was the light that her body was a jet cameo against it. So delicately wrought was her gown that he could see the epaulettes of silver light the moon gave her. She was so beautiful his eyes stung.

"Drink," she whispered, "drink with me, darling, darling . . ."

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For an instant he did not understand her at all, and only gradually did he become aware of the little glass he held. He raised it toward her and drank. And of all the shocks and titillations of taste he had had this night, this was the most startling; for it had no taste at all, almost no substance, and a temperature almost exactly that of blood. He looked stupidly down at the glass and back up at the girl. He thought that she had turned about and was watching him, though he could not be sure, since her silhouette was the same.

And then he had his second of unbearable shock, for the light went out. The moon was gone, the window, the room; Rita was gone.

For a stunned instant he stood taut, stretching his eyes wide. He made a sound that was not a word. He dropped the glass and pressed his palms to his eyes, feeling them blink, feeling the stiff silk of his lashes against them. Then he snatched the hands away, and it was still dark, and more than dark; this was not a blackness. This was like trying to see with an elbow or with a tongue; it was not black, it was *nothingness*.

He fell to his knees.

Rita laughed.

An odd, alert part of his mind seized on the laugh and understood it, and horror and fury spread through his whole being; for this was the laugh which had been tugging at her lips all evening, and it was a hard, cruel, self-assured laugh. And at the same time, because of the anger or in spite of it, desire exploded whitely within him. He moved toward the sound, groping, mouthing. There was a quick, faint series of rustling sounds from the steps, and then a light, strong web fell around him. He struck out at it, and recognized it for the unforgettable thing it was — her robe. He caught at it, ripped it, stamped upon it. He heard her bare feet run lightly down and past him, and lunged, and caught nothing. He stood, gasping painfully.

She laughed again.

"I'm blind," he said hoarsely. "Rita, I'm blind!"

"I know," she said coolly, close beside him. And again she laughed.

"What have you done to me?"

"I've watched you be a dirty animal of a man," she said.

He grunted and lunged again. His knees struck something — a chair, a cabinet — and he fell heavily. He thought he touched her foot.

"Here, lover, here!" she taunted.

He fumbled about for the thing which had tripped him, found it, used it to help him upright again. He peered uselessly about.

"Here, lover!"

He leaped, and crashed into the door-jamb: cheekbone, collarbone, hipbone, ankle were one straight blaze of pain. He clung to the polished wood.

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After a time he said, in agony, "Why?"

"No man has ever touched me and none ever will," she sang. Her breath was on his cheek. He reached and touched nothing, and then he heard her leap from her perch on a statue's pedestal by the door, where she had stood high and leaned over to speak.

No pain, no blindness, and not even the understanding that it was her witch's brew working in him could quell the wild desire he felt at her nearness. Nothing could tame the fury that shook him as she laughed. He staggered after her, bellowing.

She danced around him, laughing. Once she pushed him into a clattering rack of fire-irons. Once she caught his elbow from behind and spun him. And once, incredibly, she sprang past him and, in midair, kissed him again on the mouth.

He descended into Hell, surrounded by the small, sure patter of bare feet and sweet cool laughter. He rushed and crashed, he crouched and bled and whimpered like a hound. His roaring and blundering took an echo, and that must have been the great hall. Then there were walls that seemed more than unyielding; they struck back. And there were panels to lean against, gasping, which became opening doors as he leaned. And always the black nothingness, the writhing temptation of the pat-pat of firm flesh on smooth stones, and the ravening fury.

It was cooler, and there was no echo. He became aware of the whisper of the wind through trees. The balcony, he thought; and then, right in his ear, so that he felt her warm breath, "Come, lover . . ." and he sprang. He sprang and missed, and instead of sprawling on the terrace, there was nothing, and nothing, and nothing, and then, when he least expected it, a shower of cruel thumps as he rolled down the marble steps.

He must have had a shred of consciousness left, for he was vaguely aware of the approach of her bare feet, and of the small cautious hand that touched his shoulder and moved to his mouth, and then his chest. Then it was withdrawn, and either she laughed again or the sound was still in his mind.

Deep in the Bogs, which were brackish, there was a pool of purest water, shaded by willows and wide-wondering aspens, cupped by banks of a moss most marvelously blue. Here grew mandrake, and there were strange pipings in midsummer. No one ever heard them but a quiet girl whose beauty was so very contained that none of it showed. Her name was Barbara.

No one noticed Barbara, no one lived with her, no one cared. And Barbara's life was very full, for she was born to receive. Others are born wishing to receive, so they wear bright masks and make attractive sounds like cicadas and operettas, so others will be forced, one way or another, to

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give to them. But Barbara's receptors were wide open, and always had been, so that she needed no substitute for sunlight through a tulip petal, or the sound of morning-glories climbing, or the tangy-sweet smell of formic acid which is the only death-cry possible to an ant, or any other of the thousand things overlooked by folk who can only wish to receive.

Barbara had a garden and an orchard, and took things in to market when she cared to, and the rest of the time she spent in taking what was given. Weeds grew in her garden, but since they were welcomed, they grew only where they could keep the watermelons from being sunburned. The rabbits were welcome, so they kept to the two rows of carrots, the one of lettuce, and the one of tomato vines which were planted for them, and they left the rest alone. Goldenrod shot up beside the bean-hills to lend a hand upward, and the birds ate only the figs and peaches from the waviest top branches, and in return patrolled the lower ones for caterpillars and egg-laying flies. And if a fruit stayed green for two weeks longer until Barbara had time to go to market, or if a mole could channel moisture to the roots of the corn, why it was the least they could do.

For a brace of years Barbara had wandered more and more, impelled by a thing she could not name — if indeed she were aware of it at all. She knew only that over-the-rise was a strange and friendly place, and that it was a fine thing on arriving there to find another rise to go over. It may very well be that she now needed someone to love, for loving is a most receiving thing, as anyone can attest who has been loved without returning it. It is the one who is loved who must give and give. And she found her love, not in her wanderings, but at the market. The shape of her love, his colors and sounds, were so much with her that when she saw him first it was without surprise; and thereafter, for a very long while, it was quite enough that he lived. He gave to her by being alive, by setting the air athrum with his mighty voice, by his stride, which was, for a man afoot, the exact analog of what the horseman calls a "perfect seat."

After seeing him, of course, she received twice and twice again as much as ever before. A tree was straight and tall for the magnificent sake of being straight and tall, but wasn't straightness a part of him, and being tall? The oriole gave more now than song, and the hawk more than walking the wind, for had they not hearts like his, warm blood and his same striving to keep it so for tomorrow? And more and more, over-the-rise was the place for her, for only there could there be more and still more things like him.

But when she found the pure pool in the brackish Bogs, there was no more over-the-rise for her. It was a place without hardness or hate, where the aspens trembled only for wonder, and where all contentment was rewarded. Every single rabbit there was *the* champion nose-twinkler, and

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every waterbird could stand on one leg the longest, and proud of it. Shelf-fungi hung to the willow-trunks, making that certain, single purple of which the sunset is incapable, and a tanager and a cardinal gravely granted one another their definitions of *red.*

Here Barbara brought a heart light with happiness, large with love, and set it down on the blue moss. And since the loving heart can receive more than anything else, so it is most needed; and Barbara took the best birdsongs, and the richest colors, and the deepest peace, and all the other things which are most worth giving. The chipmunks brought her nuts when she was hungry and the prettiest stones when she was not. A green snake explained to her, in pantomime, how a river of jewels may flow uphill, and three mad otters described how a bundle of joy may slip and slide down and down and be all the more joyful for it. And there was the magic moment when a midge hovered, and then a honeybee, and then a bumblebee, and at last a hummingbird; and there they hung, playing a chord in A-sharp minor.

Then one day the pool fell silent, and Barbara learned why the water was pure.

The aspens stopped trembling.

The rabbits all came out of the thicket and clustered on the blue bank, backs straight, ears up, and all their noses as still as coral.

The waterbirds stepped backwards, like courtiers, and stopped on the brink with their heads turned sidewise, one eye closed, the better to see with the other.

The chipmunks respectfully emptied their cheek-pouches, scrubbed their paws together and tucked them out of sight; then stood still as tent-pegs.

The pressure of growth around the pool ceased: the very grass waited.

The last sound of all to be heard — and by then it was very quiet — was the soft *whick!* of an owl's eyelids, as it awoke to watch.

He came like a cloud, the earth cupping itself to take each of his golden hooves. He stopped on the bank and lowered his head, and for a brief moment his eyes met Barbara's, and she looked into a second universe of wisdom and compassion. Then there was the arch of the magnificent neck, the blinding flash of his golden horn.

And he drank, and he was gone. Everyone knows the water is pure, where the unicorn drinks.

How long had he been there? How long gone? Did time wait, too, like the grass?

"And couldn't he stay?" she wept. "Couldn't he stay?"

To have seen the unicorn is a sad thing; one might never see him more. But then — to have seen the unicorn!

She began to make a song.

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It was late when Barbara came in from the Bogs, so late the moon was bleached with cold and fleeing to the horizon. She struck the highroad just below the Great House and turned to pass it and go out to her garden house.

Near the locked main gate an animal was barking. A sick animal, a big animal . . .

Barbara could see in the dark better than most, and soon saw the creature clinging to the gate, climbing, uttering that coughing moan as it went. At the top it slipped, fell outward, dangled; then there was a ripping sound, and it fell heavily to the ground and lay still and quiet.

She ran to it, and it began to make the sound again. It was a man, and he was weeping.

It was her love, her love, who was tall and straight and so very alive — her love, battered and bleeding, puffy, broken, his clothes torn . . . crying.

Now of all times was the time for a lover to receive, to take from the loved one his pain, his trouble, his fear. "Oh, hush, hush," she whispered, her hands touching his bruised face like swift feathers. "It's all over now."

She turned him over on his back and knelt to bring him up sitting. She lifted one of his thick arms around her shoulder. He was very heavy, but she was very strong. When he was upright, gasping weakly, she looked up and down the road in the waning moonlight. Nothing, no one. The Great House was dark. Across the road, though, was a meadow with high hedgerows which might break the wind a little.

"Come, my love, my dear love," she whispered. He trembled violently.

All but carrying him, she got him across the road, over the shallow ditch, and through a gap in the hedge. She almost fell with him there. She gritted her teeth and set him down gently. She let him lean against the hedge, and then ran and swept up great armfuls of sweet broom. She made a tight springy bundle of it and set it on the ground beside him, and put a corner of her cloak over it, and gently lowered his head until it was pillowed. She folded the rest of the cloak about him. He was very cold.

There was no water near, and she dared not leave him. With her kerchief she cleaned some of the blood from his face. He was still very cold. He said, "You devil. You rotten little devil."

"Shh." She crept in beside him and cradled his head. "You'll be warm in a minute."

"Stand still," he growled. "Keep running away."

"I won't run away," she whispered. "Oh, my darling, you've been hurt, so hurt. I won't leave you. I promise I won't leave you."

He lay very still. He made the growling sound again.

"I'll tell you a lovely thing," she said softly. "Listen to me, think about the lovely thing," she crooned.

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"There's a place in the Bogs, a pool of pure water, where the trees live beautifully, willow and aspen and birch, where everything is peaceful, my darling, and the flowers grow without tearing their petals. The moss is blue and the water is like diamonds."

"You tell me stories in a thousand voices," he muttered.

"Shh. Listen, my darling. This isn't a story, it's a real place. Four miles north and a little west, and you can see the trees from the ridge with the two dwarf oaks. And I know why the water is pure!" she cried gladly. "I know why!"

He said nothing. He took a deep breath and it hurt him, for he shuddered painfully.

"The unicorn drinks there," she whispered. "I *saw* him!"

Still he said nothing. She said, "I made a song about it. Listen, this is the song I made:

> '*And* he — *suddenly gleamed! My dazzled eyes*
> *Coming from outer sunshine to this green*
> *And secret gloaming, met without surprise*
> *The vision. Only after, when the sheen*
> *And splendor of his going fled away,*
> *I knew amazement, wonder and despair,*
> *That he should come — and pass — and would not stay,*
> *The Silken-swift — the gloriously Fair!*
> *That he should come — and pass — and would not stay.*
> *So that, forever after, I must go,*
> *Take the long road that mounts against the day,*
> *Travelling in the hope that I shall know*
> *Again that lifted moment, high and sweet,*
> *Somewhere — on purple moor or windy hill —*
> *Remembering still his wild and delicate feet,*
> *The magic and the dream — remembering still!*'

His breathing was more regular. She said, "I truly *saw* him!"

"I'm blind," he said. "Blind, I'm blind."

"Oh, my dear . . ."

He fumbled for her hand, found it. For a long moment he held it. Then, slowly, he brought up his other hand and with them both he felt her hand, turned it about, squeezed it. Suddenly he grunted, half-sitting. "You're here!"

"Of course, darling. Of course I'm here."

"Why?" he shouted. "Why? *Why?* Why all of this? Why blind me?" He sat up, mouthing, and put his great hand on her throat. "Why do all

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that if . . ." The words ran together into an animal noise. Wine and witchery, anger and agony boiled in his veins.

Once she cried out.

Once she sobbed.

"Now," he said, "you'll catch no unicorns. Get away from me." He cuffed her.

"You're mad. You're sick." she cried.

"Get away," he said ominously.

Terrified, she rose. He took the cloak and hurled it after her. It almost toppled her as she ran away, crying silently.

After a long time, from behind the hedge, the sick, coughing sobs began again.

Three weeks later Rita was in the market when a hard hand took her upper arm and pressed her into the angle of a cottage wall. She did not start. She flashed her eyes upward and recognized him, and then said composedly, "Don't touch me."

"I need you to tell me something," he said. "And tell me you *will!*" His voice was as hard as his hand.

"I'll tell you anything you like," she said. "But don't touch me."

He hesitated, then released her. She turned to him casually. "What is it?" Her gaze darted across his face and its almost-healed scars. The small smile tugged at one corner of her mouth.

His eyes were slits. "I have to know this: Why did you make up all that . . . prettiness, that food, that poison . . . just for me? You could have had me for less."

She smiled. "Just for you? It was your turn, that's all."

He was genuinely surprised. "It's happened before?"

She nodded. "Whenever it's the full of the moon — and the squire's away."

"You're lying!"

"You forget yourself!" she said sharply. Then, smiling, "It is the truth, though."

"I'd've heard talk —"

"Would you now? And tell me — how many of your friends know about your humiliating adventure?"

He hung his head.

She nodded. "You see? They go away until they're healed, and they come back and say nothing. And they always will."

"You're a devil. . . . Why do you do it? Why?"

"I told you," she said openly. "I'm a woman and I act like a woman in

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my own way. No man will ever touch me, though. I am virgin and shall remain so."

"You're *what?*" he roared.

She held up a restraining, ladylike glove. "Please," she said, pained.

"Listen," he said, quietly now, but with such intensity that for once she stepped back a pace. He closed his eyes, thinking hard. "You told me . . . the pool, the pool of the unicorn, and a song, wait — wait. '*The Silken-swift, the gloriously Fair . . .*' Remember? And then I — I saw to it that *you'd* never catch a unicorn!"

She shook her head, complete candor in her face. "I like that, '*The Silken-swift.*' Pretty. But believe me — no! That isn't mine."

He put his face close to hers, and though it was barely a whisper, it came out like bullets. "Liar! Liar! I couldn't forget. I was sick, I was hurt, I was poisoned, but I know what I did!" He turned on his heel and strode away.

She put the thumb of her glove against her upper teeth for a second, then ran after him. "Del!"

He stopped but, rudely, would not turn. She rounded him, faced him. "I'll not have you believing that of me . . . it's the one thing I have left," she said tremulously.

He made no attempt to conceal his surprise. She controlled her expression with a visible effort, and said, "Please. Tell me a little more — just about the pool, the song, whatever it was."

"You don't remember?"

"I don't *know!*" she flashed. She was deeply agitated.

He said, with mock patience, "You told me of a unicorn pool out in the Bogs. You said you had seen him drink there. You made a song about it. And then I —"

"Where? Where was this?"

"You forget so soon?"

"Where? Where did it happen?"

"In the meadow, across the road from your gate, where you followed me," he said. "Where my sight came back to me when the sun came up."

She looked at him blankly, and slowly her face changed. First the imprisoned smile struggling to be free, and then — she was herself again, and she laughed. She laughed a great ringing peal of the laughter that had plagued him so, and she did not stop until he put one hand behind his back, then the other, and she saw his shoulders swell with the effort to keep from striking her dead.

"You animal!" she said, good-humoredly. "Do you know what you've done? Oh, you . . . you *animal!*" She glanced around to see that there were no ears to hear her. "I left you at the foot of the terrace steps," she

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told him. Her eyes sparkled. "Inside the gates, you understand? And you . . ."

"Don't laugh," he said quietly.

She did not laugh. "That was someone else out there. Who, I can't imagine. But it wasn't I."

He paled. "You followed me out."

"On my soul I did not," she said soberly. Then she quelled another laugh.

"That can't be," he said. "I couldn't have . . ."

"But you were blind, blind and crazy, Del-my-lover!"

"Squire's daughter, take care," he hissed. Then he pulled his big hand through his hair. "It can't be. It's three weeks; I'd have been accused . . ."

"There are those who wouldn't," she smiled. "Or — perhaps she will, in time."

"There has never been a woman so foul," he said evenly, looking her straight in the eye. "You're lying — you know you're lying."

"What must I do to prove it — aside from that which I'll have no man do?"

His lip curled. "Catch the unicorn," he said.

"If I did, you'd believe I was virgin?"

"I must," he admitted. He turned away, then said, over his shoulder, "But — *you*?"

She watched him thoughtfully until he left the marketplace. Her eyes sparkled; then she walked briskly to the goldsmith's, where she ordered a bridle of woven gold.

If the unicorn pool lay in the Bogs nearby, Rita reasoned, someone who was familiar with that brackish wasteland must know of it. And when she made a list in her mind of those few who traveled the Bogs, she knew whom to ask. With that, the other deduction came readily. Her laughter drew stares as she moved through the marketplace.

By the vegetable stall she stopped. The girl looked up patiently.

Rita stood swinging one expensive glove against the other wrist, half-smiling. "So you're the one." She studied the plain, inward-turning, peaceful face until Barbara had to turn her eyes away. Rita said, without further preamble, "I want you to show me the unicorn pool in two weeks."

Barbara looked up again, and now it was Rita who dropped her eyes. Rita said, "I can have someone else find it, of course. If you'd rather not." She spoke very clearly, and people turned to listen. They looked from Barbara to Rita and back again, and they waited.

"I don't mind," said Barbara faintly. As soon as Rita had left, smiling, she packed up her things and went silently back to her house.

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The goldsmith, of course, made no secret of such an extraordinary commission; and that, plus the gossips who had overheard Rita talking to Barbara, made the expedition into a cavalcade. The whole village turned out to see; the boys kept firmly in check so that Rita might lead the way; the young bloods ranged behind her (some a little less carefree than they might be) and others snickering behind their hands. Behind them the girls, one or two a little pale, others eager as cats to see the squire's daughter fail, and perhaps even . . . but then, only she had the golden bridle.

She carried it casually, but casualness could not hide it, for it was not wrapped, and it swung and blazed in the sun. She wore a flowing white robe, trimmed a little short so that she might negotiate the rough bogland; she had on a golden girdle and little gold sandals, and a gold chain bound her head and hair like a coronet.

Barbara walked quietly a little behind Rita, closed in with her own thoughts. Not once did she look at Del, who strode sombrely by himself.

Rita halted a moment and let Barbara catch up, then walked beside her. "Tell me," she said quietly, "why did you come? It needn't have been you."

"I'm his friend," Barbara said. She quickly touched the bridle with her finger. "The unicorn."

"Oh," said Rita. "The unicorn." She looked archly at the other girl. "You wouldn't betray all your friends, would you?"

Barbara looked at her thoughtfully, without anger. "If . . . when you catch the unicorn," she said carefully, "what will you do with him?"

"What an amazing question! I shall keep him, of course!"

"I thought I might persuade you to let him go."

Rita smiled, and hung the bridle on her other arm. "You could never do that."

"I know," said Barbara. "But I thought I might, so that's why I came." And before Rita could answer, she dropped behind again.

The last ridge, the one which overlooked the unicorn pool, saw a series of gasps as the ranks of villagers topped it, one after the other, and saw what lay below; and it was indeed beautiful.

Surprisingly, it was Del who took it upon himself to call out, in his great voice, "Everyone wait here!" And everyone did; the top of the ridge filled slowly, from one side to the other, with craning, murmuring people. And then Del bounded after Rita and Barbara.

Barbara said, "I'll stop here."

"Wait," said Rita, imperiously. Of Del she demanded, "What are you coming for?"

"To see fair play," he growled. "The little I know of witchcraft makes me like none of it."

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"Very well," she said calmly. Then she smiled her very own smile. "Since you insist, I'd rather enjoy Barbara's company too."

Barbara hesitated. "Come, he won't hurt you, girl," said Rita. "He doesn't know you exist."

"Oh," said Barbara, wonderingly.

Del said gruffly, "I do so. She has the vegetable stall."

Rita smiled at Barbara, the secrets bright in her eyes. Barbara said nothing, but came with them.

"You should go back, you know," Rita said silkily to Del, when she could. "Haven't you been humiliated enough yet?"

He did not answer.

She said, "Stubborn animal! Do you think I'd have come this far if I weren't sure?"

"Yes," said Del, "I think perhaps you would."

They reached the blue moss. Rita shuffled it about with her feet and then sank gracefully down to it. Barbara stood alone in the shadows of the willow grove. Del thumped gently at an aspen with his fist. Rita, smiling, arranged the bridle to cast, and laid it across her lap.

The rabbits stayed hidden. There was an uneasiness about the grove. Barbara sank to her knees, and put out her hand. A chipmunk ran to nestle in it.

This time there was a difference. This time it was not the slow silencing of living things that warned of his approach, but a sudden babble from the people on the ridge.

Rita gathered her legs under her like a sprinter, and held the bridle poised. Her eyes were round and bright, and the tip of her tongue showed between her white teeth. Barbara was a statue. Del put his back against his tree, and became as still as Barbara.

Then from the ridge came a single, simultaneous intake of breath, and silence. One knew without looking that some stared speechless, that some buried their faces or threw an arm over their eyes.

He came.

He came slowly this time, his golden hooves choosing his paces like so many embroidery needles. He held his splendid head high. He regarded the three on the bank gravely, and then turned to look at the ridge for a moment. At last he turned again, and came round the pond by the willow grove. Just on the blue moss, he stopped to look down into the pond. It seemed that he drew one deep clear breath. He bent his head then, and drank, and lifted his head to shake away the shining drops.

He turned toward the three spellbound humans and looked at them each in turn. And it was not Rita he went to, at last, nor Barbara. He came to

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Del, and he drank of Del's eyes with his own just as he had partaken of the pool — deeply and at leisure. The beauty and wisdom were there, and the compassion, and what looked like a bright white point of anger. Del knew that the creature had read everything then, and that he knew all three of them in ways unknown to human beings.

There was a majestic sadness in the way he turned then, and dropped his shining head, and stepped daintily to Rita. She sighed, and rose up a little, lifting the bridle. The unicorn lowered his horn to receive it —

— and tossed his head, tore the bridle out of her grasp, sent the golden thing high in the air. It turned there in the sun, and fell into the pond.

And the instant it touched the water, the pond was a bog and the birds rose mourning from the trees. The unicorn looked up at them, and shook himself. Then he trotted to Barbara and knelt, and put his smooth stainless head in her lap.

Barbara's hands stayed on the ground by her sides. Her gaze roved over the warm white beauty, up to the tip of the golden horn and back.

The scream was frightening. Rita's hands were up like claws, and she had bitten her tongue; there was blood on her mouth. She screamed again. She threw herself off the now-withered moss toward the unicorn and Barbara. "She can't be!" Rita shrieked. She collided with Del's broad right hand. "It's wrong, I tell you, she, you, I . . ."

"I'm satisfied," said Del, low in his throat. "Keep away, squire's daughter."

She recoiled from him, made as if to try to circle him. He stepped forward. She ground her chin into one shoulder, then the other, in a gesture of sheer frustration, turned suddenly and ran toward the ridge. "It's mine, it's mine," she screamed. "I tell you, it can't be her, don't you understand? I never once, I never did, but she, but she —"

She slowed and stopped, then, and fell silent at the sound that rose from the ridge. It began like the first patter of rain on oak leaves, and it gathered voice until it was a rumble and then a roar. She stood looking up, her face working, the sound washing over her. She shrank from it.

It was laughter.

She turned once, a pleading just beginning to form on her face. Del regarded her stonily. She faced the ridge then, and squared her shoulders, and walked up the hill, to go into the laughter, to go through it, to have it follow her all the way home and all the days of her life.

Del turned to Barbara just as she bent over the beautiful head. She said, "Silken-swift . . . go free."

The unicorn raised its head and looked up at Del. Del's mouth opened. He took a clumsy step forward, stopped again. "*You!*"

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Barbara's face was wet. "You weren't to know," she choked. "You weren't ever to know. . . . I was so glad you were blind, because I thought you'd never know."

He fell on his knees beside her. And when he did, the unicorn touched her face with his satin nose, and all the girl's pent-up beauty flooded outward. The unicorn rose from his kneeling, and whickered softly. Del looked at her, and only the unicorn was more beautiful. He put out his hand to the shining neck, and for a moment felt the incredible silk of that mane flowing across his fingers. The unicorn reared then, and wheeled, and in a great leap was across the bog, and in two more was on the crest of the farther ridge. He paused there briefly, with the sun on him, and then was gone.

Barbara said, "For us, he lost his pool, his beautiful pool."

And Del said, "He will get another. He must." With difficulty he added, "He couldn't be . . . punished . . . for being so gloriously Fair."

Some Facts About Robots

I

The race of robots drink no beer,
Can write with ink and make no smear.
It lives with care and has been taught to
Do precisely what it ought to.

A robot has no growing pains,
It misses neither boats nor trains,
It is not troubled with digestion,
Its loyalty is not in question.

LEONARD WOLF

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It is a familiar axiom of spaceflight that only at certain calculated seasons is it advisable to attempt a journey from one planet in our system to another. Here Mildred Clingerman points out that such calculations might well be based on other factors than the orbital positions of the planets concerned.

The Word

by MILDRED CLINGERMAN

I CAN TELL YOU we were frightened when that woman opened the door. Goddess-tall, she was, like all those people. It is only when they are children their size does not frighten one . . . much. Even hunger, I think, could not have driven us forth from our hiding place to mingle with those giants in their crowded streets, but on that night Lodi had slipped back to report that the streets were thronged only with the little ones. We decided to chance it. Dorion would be yet three days repairing the ship, he said, and his fingers had slowed and grown clumsy because of his hunger.

Lodi blamed himself bitterly for the hunger that gnawed at the four of us. Lodi is a good leader, and I, for one, would follow him anywhere, but Mun and I sometimes have to sit on Lodi. Literally, I mean. For instance, while Dorion grumbled over his repairs and paid no attention at all to anything else, Mun and I had been forced to listen to Lodi explaining over and over just how it happened that he forgot to fill the emergency food bins. At last Mun nodded wearily at me. So Mun sat on Lodi's head and I sat on his feet and we took turns feeding back his own sad story, with variations.

"Old Yaud called you in to explain an entry in our ship's log. How could you explain it when you couldn't even read it?" said Mun.

"There we were," I took up the refrain, "just ready to take off from Big Ship with a million details to attend to, and you off in old Yaud's office buttering up the old idiot instead of checking the loading!"

But we couldn't keep Lodi down.

That's why I'd rather be on his observer ship than any of the twenty-three others attached to Big Ship. What if his crew is always being called to scuff the green carpet in the council chamber? With Lodi as our leader

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(and he tromping all over rules and regulations) we bring back the clearest, closest viewings of all. Tiu, who never leaves the Big Ship, but sits before the view screens day after day, blesses Lodi for his daring and pleads for us in the council chamber.

Now Lodi squirmed out from under us and got to his feet. "Shut up a minute," he said, and looked at Dorion who was driving himself at the repairs despite his slowing fingers. Then Lodi beckoned for Mun and me. We left the comparative safety of the ship and stumbled after him. I almost envied Dorion left groaning over his work. It was very dark outside the ship, but Lodi knew the way. Every night since the forced landing Lodi had sneaked into the nearby town with the small, portable view-taker he'd persuaded Dorion to make for him. Tiu, we knew, would be delighted with these views. While we walked we imagined among ourselves how his round belly would shake with his whoops of joy, and of how he would speak up in the council chamber, slowly and powerfully in our defense. It was comforting to remember Tiu at this moment. Because we were breaking the strictest rule of all. Lodi was ignoring it, and my empty belly and I saw no reason to remind him of the fact that crews are supposed under all circumstances to *stay inside the ship.*

It was a long walk. But at last Lodi halted us and made us lie down in some deep shadows while he crawled ahead to assess our position. Mun and I communicated our nervousness silently and lifted our heads to peer at the lights ahead. I remembered the giants who lived there, and I shuddered. I had never seen one any closer than ship's length away, staring goggle-eyed at us through the window of his aircraft.

Suddenly, I felt something rubbing against my hand. My heart almost stopped before I saw it was a small, mewing animal that meant no harm. I scratched its neck as I would have scratched the neck of a *pprrr* at home. It liked it.

Lodi sounded the clear-ahead whistle. Mun and I stood up and walked forward into the lights. I saw, from afar, Lodi standing calmly on a walk jostled by a crowd of children. All along the street the light standards showed dozens of strolling children, but none of the frightening big ones. Not one of the children paid much attention to Lodi, I saw, other than to point at him and stare a moment, smiling, before they moved on.

"It's all right, Cleel," Lodi reassured me, though he did not speak aloud. Lodi, too, was nervous. "They all have food. All of them. Smell it?" He waved his arm encompassingly. "Do you see they are all carrying sacks full of food? Watch them. They go up to a house, knock, say a certain word, and more food is put in their sacks. It's a curious procedure, and I am even now recording it with the view-taker." As he talked silently,

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coaxingly, we edged nearer to him. Lodi grabbed Mun impatiently and pulled him along by the hand. I was shaking with fright all the way to my toenails, but I plodded beside them.

"And are we, God forbid, to rob these children of their full sacks?" I have followed Lodi into many a trouble-making, council-shaking act, but I would not rob even a giant's child.

"No, no!" Lodi glared at me. "Have I yet led you into the unlawful?"

Mun and I clutched each other and snickered. Lodi dropped Mun's hand and stalked ahead. Another kind of animal, much larger than the mewing one (or we), came running up to Lodi, wagging its tail and licking Lodi on the chin. Lodi kept pushing it away and patting it timidly all at the same time. The animal then ran around and around Lodi keeping him prisoner and almost knocking him off his feet. Ahead of us a child turned and whistled. The animal went bounding away.

"Thank God," Lodi muttered. "I thought I had been chosen for Only-Love. Think how Dorion would have cursed if I'd been forced to return to the ship with that great beast. Now watch and extend your hearing." We all paused before a lighted house, and sheltered by the hedge, watched a group of children who waited before the open door. The light poured out on their upturned faces, and I gasped at the sight. One of the children bore the face of a man aged in wickedness. Another that of a polished skull. One child straddled a broom and wore a high, peaked hat and had the face of a toothless crone.

"Oh pity their parents!" I cried out. Lodi hushed me so that we might hear the secret word. A man giant came to the open door. The children all screeched together, so that it was difficult to sort out the syllables.

"How sad that they have the voices of children with such faces!"

Lodi shushed me again while we watched. The man put a piece of food into each sack. The children pushed and shoved each other in their eagerness. One child spilled all the contents of his sack and, wailing, stooped to retrieve them. And, oh then! His face fell off. I myself wailed at the horror of it. Lodi stuffed his hand against my mouth, and then I saw that underneath the face-that-fell dwelt another gentler face, like any child's.

"Did you hear the word?" Lodi hissed.

"No, did you?" Mun reached out and dragged Lodi into the shadow.

"Clang-heads!" Lodi whispered heatedly. "I will give you the word, but where oh where are *your* ears? Cleel must needs make the night ghastly with howling. Oh, yes, your lungs are ever-present, your mouth is ever-moving, your belly ever-calling, but who, *who* is it that does the head work, always and forever? *Who*, I say, makes it possible for you two honk-heads to stay in Observation? *Who?*"

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"Tiu," I answered him. Lodi stopped raving and started giggling. We all sat down in the midst of the hedge and giggled. When we could stop, we got up and walked to the last house with a light. Lodi whispered the word to us, but we pushed him into the leading position, so that it was he who knocked on the door.

A light came on over our heads. The door opened. Goddess-tall was that woman standing in the doorway. Mun grabbed my hand, and my heart almost stopped again. But she was beautiful, that giant woman. She smiled down at us, and Lodi, who is susceptible to all the nuances of love, flapped his antennae in shy acknowledgment.

"Triggertree?" His thin, sweet voice gave him away. Lodi was in love again and, as usual, it was mutual. He lifted his eyes to the woman and she knelt before him. Just like that. That's Lodi for you. I poked Mun in the ribs. Mun started to giggle again.

"Oh, you darlings!" the woman's mind said. And I'd swear it was the same kind of thing she said aloud. She kept murmuring at us, and we caught the no-sack concept, and you should have seen Lodi pulling his face into a mournful no-sack-poor-little-thing to match her mind-talk. She loved it, that one. And Lodi wasn't half trying. Just then in the middle of all that exclamatory murmuring of hers I caught a concept that froze me to the marrow. Translated into words it was enough to set us all trembling again. Do you know what that woman's mind was saying to us, not about us, but right to us?

"Oh, the darling little men from Mars! See their cunning little costumes . . . Your mother must have worked hours . . . And did you come in a lit-tle space ship all that way just to say 'trick or treat' at my house? And did you think I wouldn't give you anything just because you forgot your sacks? Wait, just wait. I've got just the things little Martians like!"

She stood up suddenly. Mun and I fell back in fright. But she didn't seem to notice. She went darting deeper into the house, while we stood there frantically communicating, all mind-talking at once, with Lodi louder and stronger than Mun or I, trying to keep us from bolting and running like hell shipwards. We stayed, but you can't always trust Lodi's judgment when he's newly in love. He was stamping his foot and silently cursing us when the woman came back. She had three enormous sacks stuffed with food. We staggered as she placed them in our arms. I could smell the food, and some of my panic stilled. Food does that, you know.

"Now go home, darlings", the woman said in effect. "It's getting late, and your mother will worry." I thought of Dorion sweating back in the ship with never a thought for us. But I was too scared to giggle. I ran with the heavy sack. Out on the street I stopped to look back. Mun was right

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behind me, but that Lodi! He had his arms around the woman's neck. She was kneeling before him and kissing him right between the antennae! I heard her call as he broke away from her at last. "Be sure to come back next year. Don't forget!"

And do you know, we may do that, if Tiu ever gets us out of disciplinary confinement. He's working at it. We had some of the food left when we got back to Big Ship. Tiu says any civilization that can cook like that can't be all bad . . . or mad. Lodi, who was too full of love to be afraid, kept his ears open, and he says the woman mind-named the things as she placed them in the sacks. Every day now while he plucks glucklings for Morden he names them over like a love song. "Popcorn, peanuts, apples, candy, doughnuts, cookies, cupcakes, *dandy!*" I don't know which was which. Neither does Lodi. But I'm going to remember that word Triggertree. Nobody has ever kissed me right between the antennae. Lodi says it's wonderful.

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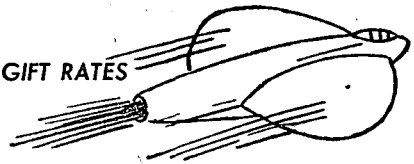

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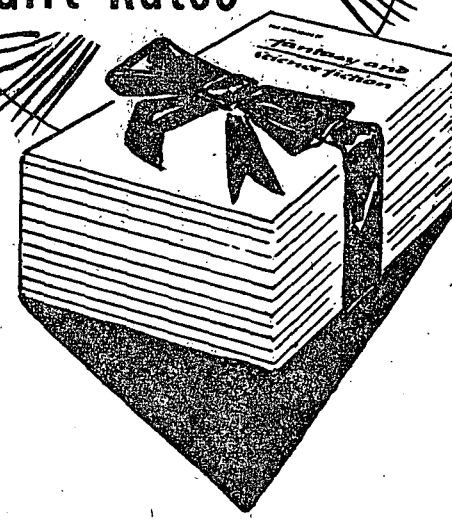

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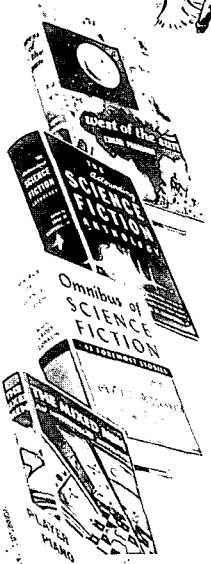

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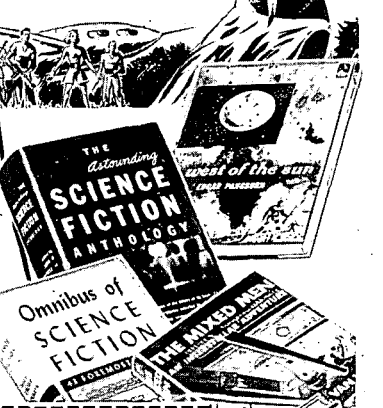

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